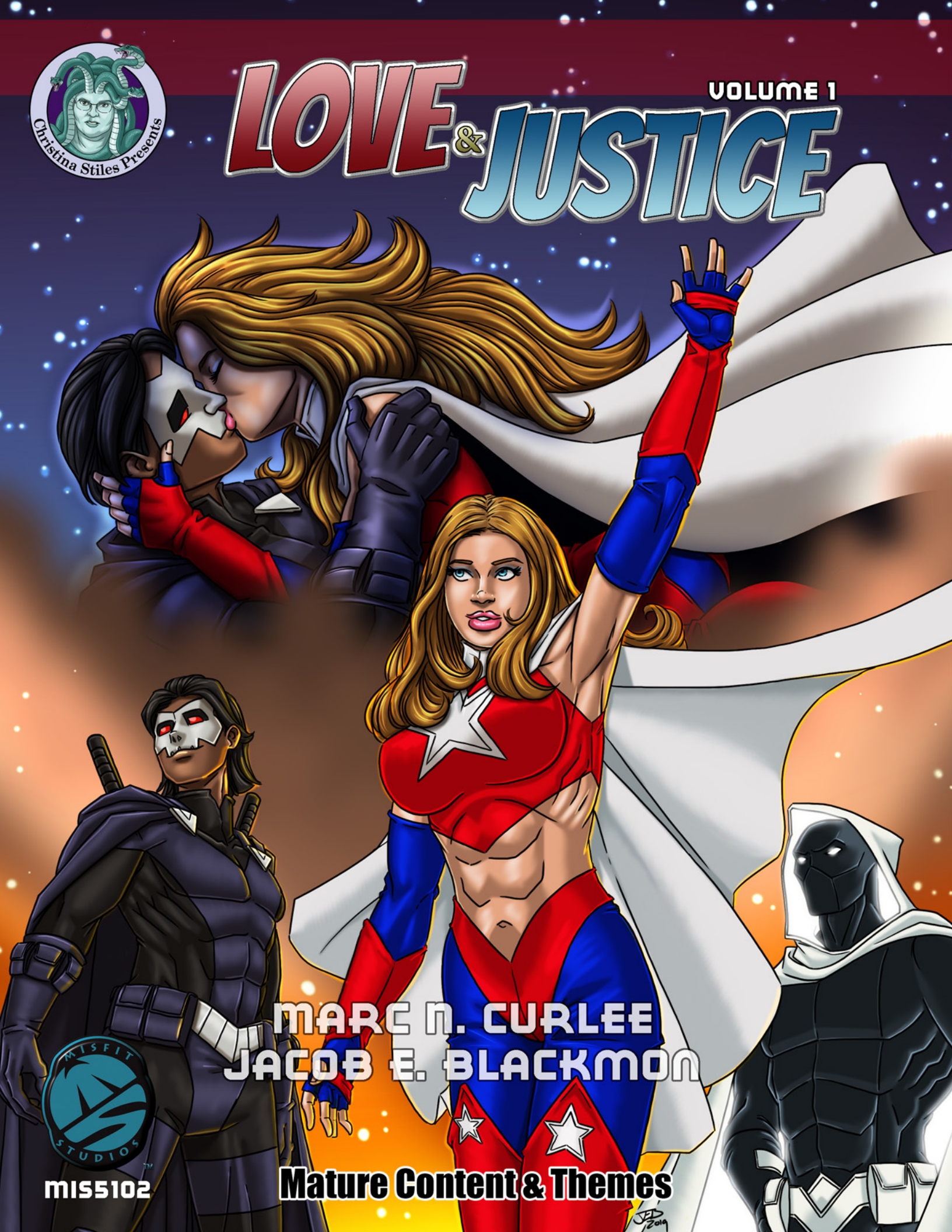
Christina Stiles Presents
LOVE & JUSTICE
VOLUME 1
MARC N. CURLEE
JACOB E. BLACKMON
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Mature Content & Themes

LOVE & JUSTICE VOLUME 1

Dedicated to **MARC CURLEE**, August 23, 1964 - March 2, 2021

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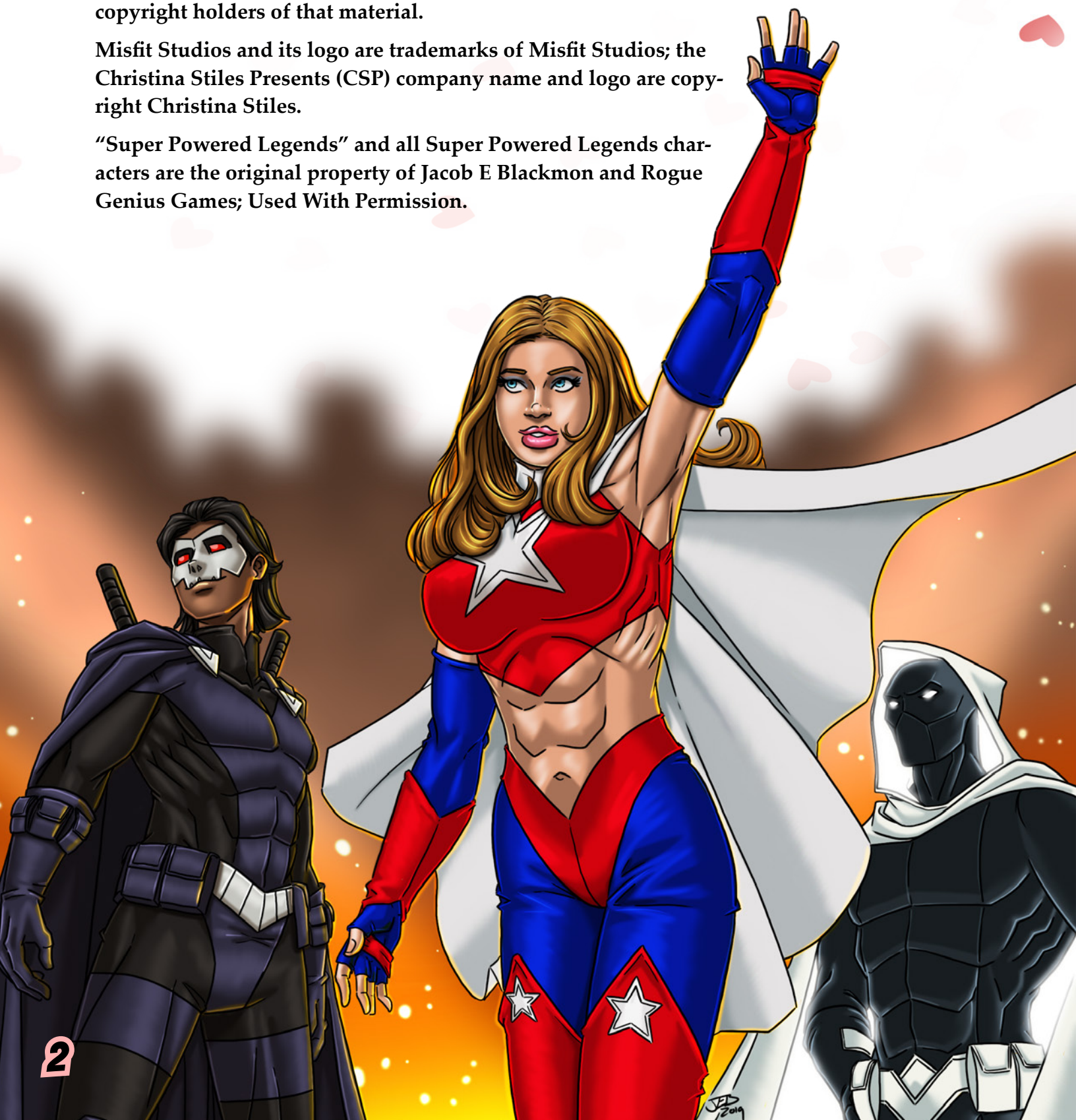

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Introduction

I'm not sure how it happened, but somehow Christina Stiles Presents has become a publisher of love, romance, and, yes, sex, in gaming. (And, oddly enough, the concept for this book came about at the authors' house in Oklahoma while they were commiserating with me over the collapse of my marriage of 26 years.) While this book is not the unexpurgated exploration of the topic that *The Book of Passion* is for 3.75 (with more to be published), it does discuss ways to bring romance to your superhero game, allowing your group to fully engage in an aspect of great significance to the comics genre itself. Volume One (this book) focuses on the history of romance in comics and the tropes associated with them, and offers suggestions on how to bring romance comfortably into your game. Volume Two offers specific rules and builds to use within your game.

Fans of Rogue Genius Games' *Mutants & Masterminds* products will be familiar with the name Jacob E. Blackmon from his Super Powered Legends supplements, but are likely unfamiliar with Marc Curlee…unless they pay attention to artist credits, as he was one of my go-to artists. This book (and its companion volume) is Marc Curlee's first foray into game publication as an author (but see below).

We hope you spend the next months exploring love. The world could use a little more of it.

IN MEMORY OF MARC

I can't remember the exact year I first met Marc Curlee in person. I recall I got to meet Jacob Blackmon and Marc (and roommates Ali and Tom) at SoonerCon in Oklahoma City, where I was a guest game designer. I had already worked with Jacob on art for my gaming products, and he and his roommates (Marc among them) offered me a place to stay while attending the con. I believe Marc had done some pieces for me for *Bite Me!* as well, by that time.

Marc was a tall, big, cuddly bear of a guy with a great sense of humor. He spent his days and nights working on campaigns while watching movies and TV shows. Hunched over a tray table on which sat his laptop, he sat on his comfy couch and typed away for hours every day—far into the night, as the rest of us faded away to other rooms to sleep. During these trips to Oklahoma (which became almost an annual ritual for me to see my adopted family), Marc introduced me to media like *The Gamers* video series, *Lego Batman*, *The Rocketeer*, and *Diggy Diggy Hole*. We all watched *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage* episodes together, and squatted at various restaurants to eat and share stories of games played and gaming ideas.

We all talked about things we'd like to publish together, and Marc lamented that he wanted to be a writer as well as an artist, to have his name as author on a product. So, here's where the tears flow: Marc did not live to see this book come to fruition. I am heartbroken that I could not grant that wish before he passed from us. I'd wanted this out in 2020, when Marc was still doing okay, but it just wasn't ready to go to print for various reasons—one of which was that it needed an editor familiar with the depth and breadth of comics, and that wasn't me (yes, I get my nerd card revoked). Luckily, Spike Y Jones, my long-suffering personal editor, fit the bill, and he finalized our team on *Love & Justice*.

I dedicate this book to Marc Curlee. He was a gamer, artist, designer, and all-around great guy. And he was a good friend whom I sorely miss. I hope he's gaming in the Great Beyond, sharing his wonderful stories and ideas with all those around him. Save a chair for me, Marc.

-- Christina Stiles, June 2021

A WORD OF WARNING

Love & Justice explores adult themes of romance, love, and sexuality in superhero role-playing games. While not explicit, there are themes that could make some readers uncomfortable. Caution is advised for young readers or those sensitive to certain sex-related topics.

1. Ah, Love ...

We all know that love is a powerful emotion, and as such, it's a mighty motivational force. If you doubt its sway, just consider how often love fuels the world's most popular and memorable stories, whether they are poems, songs, literature, plays, movies, or television shows—the love of family, the love of a circle of good friends or comrades in arms, or romantic love.

Love of all sorts can drive people to take on impossible odds, perform unexpected and incredible feats, or make heartbreaking sacrifices. Love makes people take risks they would not otherwise take. They will go to astounding lengths to prove their love to someone they hope will love them back, to protect someone who shares their love—or, from a villainous perspective, to punish someone for not returning their love or for "getting in their way."

Love is a fantastic storytelling tool for roleplaying games. Many players feel the thrill of danger far more when their character's romantic interest is threatened than when someone threatens the PC!

But do love and superheroes really go together?

ROMANCE AND COMIC BOOKS

Love has always had a place in superhero comics. In fact, the idea of a hero having to balance a secret identity and a hero identity, along with the dramatic tension caused by having to decide whether to trust their loved ones with the truth, has been around longer than comics themselves. If the hero retains their secret, then they must constantly lie to the people they love the most. If they reveal their secret, then that might put those loved ones in mortal danger should villains ever discover the link.

Before the advent of the first true costumed superhero, Superman (in *Action Comics #1*, published in April of 1938), there were already numerous heroic so-called "mystery men" in literature and in radio plays. Most of these characters had love interests; it had been a staple of the genre ever since Baroness Emmuska "Emma" Orczy created the original masked heroic adventurer in 1905, penning the tales of the Scarlet Pimpernel. In stories set against the backdrop of the French Revolution, heroic British nobleman Sir Percival Blakeney spent his nights smuggling French noble families out of the clutches of the bloody revolution going on across the English Channel. And he had to keep his alternate identity as the Scarlet Pimpernel a secret from his wife, the beautiful and renowned French actress Marguerite St. Just, because, despite how much he loved her, he could not know whether or not she might reveal his clandestine activities to the French authorities.

The Shadow/Lamont Cranston had ties to Margo Lane, who was either a love interest or simply an agent of the Shadow, depending on the source material. This, in turn, inspired Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster to give their creation, Superman/Clark Kent, a love interest in the form of Lois Lane.

Their decision to make Lois a fellow journalist at the *Daily Planet* was ingenious. Lois Lane's dedication to her job as an investigative reporter meant that she was willing to take all kinds of risks to get a good story. This gave Superman opportunities to help her out when she got into a jam. And since Clark Kent was her colleague, it meant that they had a lot of opportunities to interact with one another when there weren't bullets flying or 100-foot-tall robots and talking apes threatening the city. Clark could form a close bond with Lois in his civilian identity, while developing a different kind of relationship with her in his heroic identity; relationships which sometimes were at odds with each other!

In the years since, stories involving love and romance have thrived in the comic book superhero genre. The form of those relationships has developed over the years, as readers' expectations and society's views about what is realistic and what is acceptable have expanded.

ROMANCE COMICS AS A GENRE

Superhero comics are primarily focused on dynamic action. Superhero comics were originally written to be interesting to readers ranging from kids to young adults, and especially American soldiers overseas in

the Second World War. Because of that age range, writers and artists of superhero comics in the late 1930s through the early 1950s kept most romantic relationships in the books straightforward.

But costumed crime-fighter comics weren't the only comic books produced in the '30s and '40s. Funny animal and cartoon character "funny books" were popular with the younger audience, and over time teenage humor comics like *Archie* evolved from simply telling gags to incorporating tame romantic plots, including love triangles and stories based on jealousy or misunderstandings, while maintaining their focus on humor.

In the late 1940s, comic book publishers began to produce comic books specifically about love and romantic relationships, hoping to attract readers who thought that superheroes, funny animals, and giggling teenagers were childish. Crestwood Publishing's 1947 debut of *Young Romance* (subtitled "Designed For The More Adult Readers Of Comics," and written and drawn by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, better known as the creators of Captain America) was at the forefront of this new movement, paving the way for others, like Timely's *My Romance* and Fox Feature Syndicate's awkwardly named *My Life True Stories in Pictures* in 1948, and a tsunami of other titles in 1949 and '50.

These read like soap operas in comic book form. Radio soap operas had been around since 1930's *Painted Dreams*, which set the tone for the genre, and also gave it the name, as the radio play was sponsored by a laundry soap company. The first television daytime soap

ROMANCE COMICS THROUGH THE YEARS

Patsy Walker (Timely/Marvel), 1945-1965, 124 issues. Originally classified as a teen humor comic, *Patsy Walker* evolved into a romance comic. Patsy herself would later evolve even further, into Marvel's costumed crime-fighter Hellcat!)

Millie the Model (Timely/Marvel, 1945-1973, 207 issues. Originally classified as a humor comic.)

My Date Comics (Hillman, 1947-1948, 4 issues. First humor-romance comic.)

Young Romance (Crestwood/DC, 1947-1975, 208 issues. Generally considered the first romance comic. Acquired by DC in 1963.)

A Date with Judy (DC, 1947-1960, 79 issues. A humor-romance spin-off of a comedy radio series.)

My Life True Stories in Pictures (Fox, 1948-1950, 12 issues.)

Love Romances (Timely/Marvel, 1948-1963, 101 issues.)

Sweethearts (Fawcett/Charlton, 1948-1973, 170 issues. First monthly romance comic. Acquired by Charlton in 1954.)

Teen-Age Romances (St. John, 1949-1955, 45 issues.)

Young Love (Crestwood/DC, 1949-1977, 199 issues. Spin-off of *Young Romance*. Acquired by DC in 1963.)

First Love Illustrated (Harvey, 1949-1963, 90 issues.)

Girls' Love Stories (DC, 1949-1973, 180 issues. DC's first romance series.)

Heart Throbs (Quality/DC, 1949-1972, 146 issues. Acquired by DC in 1957.)

Lovelorn (American, 1949-1960, 114 issues.)

Romantic Adventures (American, 1949-1964, 138 issues.)

Romantic Secrets (Fawcett/Charlton, 1949-1964, 87 issues. Acquired by Charlton in 1953.)

Romantic Story (Fawcett/Charlton, 1949-1973, 130 issues. Acquired by Charlton in 1954.)

Secret Hearts (DC, 1949-1971, 153 issues.)

Girls' Romances (DC, 1950-1971, 160 issues.)

Falling in Love (DC, 1955-1973, 143 issues.)

I Love You (Charlton, 1955-1980, 124 issues.)

Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane (DC, 1958-1974, 137 issues.)

Just Married (Charlton, 1958-1976, 114 issues.)

Love Diary (Charlton, 1958-1976, 102 issues.)

Teen-Age Love (Charlton, 1958-1973, 93 issues.)

Teen Confessions (Charlton, 1959-1976, 97 issues.)

Strangers in Paradise (Abstract Studio, 1994-2007, 106 issues.)

opera, *These Are My Children*, didn't debut until two years after *Young Romance* comics hit the shelves.

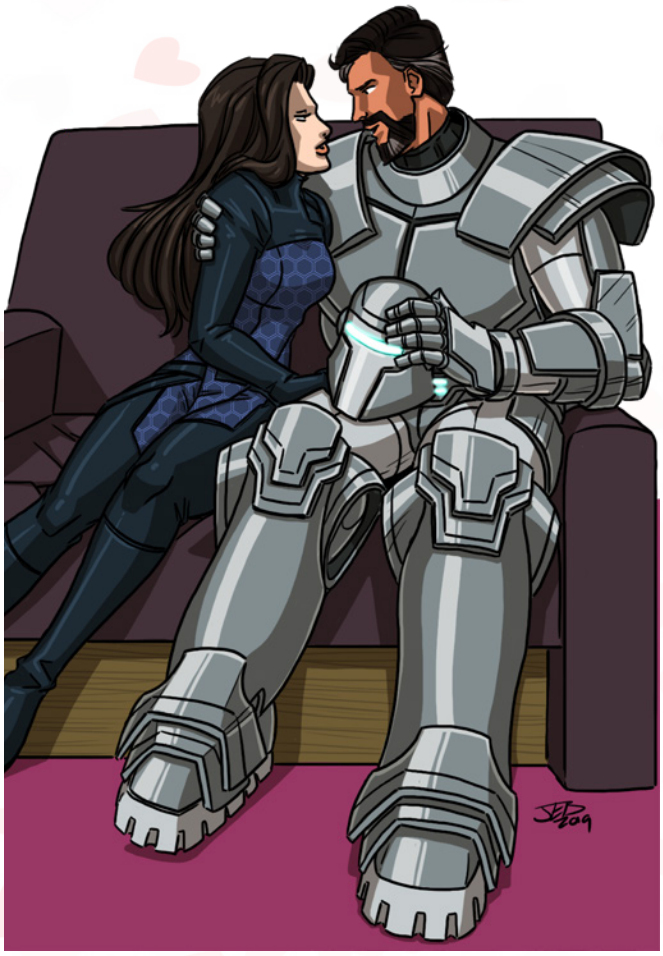
Romance comics took a hit in 1954 with the creation of the Comics Code Authority, a self-imposed set of guidelines adopted by the major comic book publishers to avoid federal legislation restricting their content. Although the primary focus of the CCA was on graphic depictions of gore and violence, the Code also placed limitations on numerous other aspects of art and storytelling.

The CCA's restrictions, written at the height of a "moral panic," placed so many limitations on the kinds of stories and relationships allowed to be depicted in comic books that comic book romance stories became bland and repetitive, with a required emphasis on "traditional" 1950s gender roles. The Comics Code included a ban on any mention of LGBTQ+ relationships, including even heterosexual characters discussing the subject. Men were depicted in "provider" roles in any relationship, and women were expected to fill "caretaker" roles. Men were always in charge in the relationship, with the woman having opinions, but the man always having the final say. Even when female characters began to have more agency in the 1960s, a female detective, for example, still "required" a male character to fight for her if she had to take on a non-female opponent.

The Code even had restrictions on what kinds of poses characters could be shown in; nothing too suggestive or lurid. This restriction, though, didn't prohibit showing a man bending a willful adult woman over his knee for a spanking to "teach her a lesson"—presumably because that was an extension of accepted disciplinary practice for children.

By the mid-1970s, the romance comics had all but disappeared, with occasional exceptions like the 1994-2007 run of *Strangers in Paradise*, or the Hernandez Brothers' amazing and complex *Love & Rockets* series, which debuted as an independent comic in 1981 and continues to this day.

As decades went by, the Comics Code restrictions were eased, but not as quickly as the evolution of the rest of the entertainment industry, and by 2011 it had died.



ADDING SEX AND ROMANCE TO YOUR SUPERHERO CAMPAIGN

If you decide to include sex and romance in your games—and you should, or else *Love & Justice* will be of limited use to you—there are things you should consider. For example, some gamers and gaming groups are more comfortable with the subject than others. And even if a group is fine with in-game romance, there is always the question of how detailed descriptions should be. What kinds of relationships are people at ease with? What do you do if there are younger players in the group? And how do you handle the difference between relationships involving a player character and a non-player character and one between two PCs?

Common sense and communication are key. Sit everyone in your gaming group down—have a "Session Zero" either before the campaign starts or before game time for an existing campaign—and open a discussion on introducing romance and sexual elements.

Chapter 1: Ah, Love ...

SESSION ZERO

This pre-game discussion can be done either in open conversation as a group or individually, or through a questionnaire so only, you, as GM, knows whose answers are whose.

Ask the players if they have any interest in their characters developing romantic relationships, serious or otherwise, and whether they mind if other people's characters do likewise.

And if you are a player in a new group, don't wait for the GM: You might want to start this discussion before entering the game.

Once the subject has been broached, more detailed decisions can follow.

For instance, it might be uncomfortable for some players to listen to you and another player go into detail about a PC's love life. Most gamers are all right with general descriptions like, "We kiss," "I ask if we could go back to my apartment/stateroom/battle-van/flying castle for the night," or "I try to seduce the Armageddon-bot."

Other groups may approve of a bit more detail, like, "We make gentle love on the beach," or "We engage in an all-night session of wild monkey-sex, and the next morning no one knows where all their clothes are."

Few groups are going to want to go into more explicit detail than that at the gaming table. Even if all the players are over 18, a good general guideline is, "What would be shown on screen in a PG or PG-13 superhero movie?" So, flirting and kissing are usually fine to describe, as is the "We start taking each other's clothes off" stage. But beyond that, it's best to do the old Hollywood "fade to black" or "pan over to the fireplace," and pick things up with people pulling their boots on or chatting over breakfast. Or the love scenes could be handled through "blue-booking" (that is, by e-mail exchanges, or players writing in-character journals describing events best not played out at the gaming table).

Even if they're open to romantic gaming, some players might not be comfortable with the idea of playing a romantic relationship between their character and a GM who is of a different gender than the NPC of romantic interest. Since shape-shifting technology is not available for real-world GMs, abide by the players' wishes and either avoid romantic plotlines with those players or, if the players agree, you can keep things very vague and speak in third person when things get "mushy."

Some people are more easily embarrassed by romance and sex than others. So, it's vitally important that you never push players beyond their comfort zone on this topic. Ask the limits of the other players and respect those limits.

CHAPTER 4: SESSION ZERO SUGGESTIONS details more topics that might be covered.

AFTER THE SESSION ZERO

In the Session Zero discussion, a number of things may occur.

The simplest outcome is if all the players are interested in having romance elements in the superhero campaign. If that's the case, then you can proceed, using the rest of this book to provide ideas and guidelines.

But even if everyone agrees that romance is a good thing to include, you shouldn't take over and say, "Okay, your character loves this NPC, and *your* character loves *this* NPC, but the two NPCs love each other." Romantic plots should be developed with input from the players, either before the game begins or while the game is underway. That way the players are invested in the relationships, and they will get more out of the stories that are centered on their characters.

Another possible outcome of the Session Zero discussion is that some players might be uncomfortable engaging in romance in a game themselves, but be willing to allow others to do so. If that's the case, you can run some romantic storylines for other players, but don't push any on the reticent players or try to "lure" them in. They may come around eventually and decide they want to give it a chance. Or maybe not. And that's all right.

It's also possible that one or more players won't want to engage in any kind of romantic entanglements, *and* will be uncomfortable having those elements included in the game even if their PCs aren't involved. The decision of what to do shouldn't be solely yours, even though you're "the game master." The group should discuss the best way of handling the situation to everyone's satisfaction. Some might decide that sex-based plotlines should be avoided entirely for games that include those players, even if they are not directly

involved. Or perhaps the reticent players can volunteer to step aside for this campaign. Each game group is different, and this situation does not have a one-size-fits-all solution.

Later sections of *Love & Justice* discuss how to find the level of detail and type of stories involving romance that will work best for you and your players.

Changing Your Mind

Having a Session Zero helps set expectations before going ahead with a romance-using super campaign, but it's important to remember that players are allowed to change their minds at any point afterwards, including during the game.

As some players could be too embarrassed to stop the flow in the middle of a game, you can institute an X-card system. After explaining how it works, you put a card (or multiple cards) with an X on it on the game table within easy reach of all the players. If at any point a player becomes uncomfortable with the story, they can tap the card and the GM and any involved players change direction, no questions asked. Alternatively, the player can draw an X on a blank card and raise it or otherwise call your attention to it, with the same result.

Can this be momentarily disruptive? Yes. But not as disruptive as having a player walk out on an adventure or gaming group. Games are supposed to be about having fun, and if a player isn't having fun, then it's time to make changes to the game.

Romance in Games with Young Players or in Public Games

If you have young players in your game, or you are running at a game shop, convention, or other venue where people who aren't part of the group may happen by, it is also best to simply not include plots based on sexuality at all. It is fine for a Magical Girl character to "fight in the name of Love," but beyond that, it is best to save the romantic storylines until the player or the PC is older.

Keep it simple and keep it clean. Again, movie content guidelines by age rating are a good benchmark for how far to let things progress at the table. Games with minors in them should always be G-Rated.

PC or Not PC? Love Among the Classes

There are two kinds of characters in tabletop role-playing games: player characters (PCs) and non-player characters run by the GM (NPCs). Relationships can potentially develop between these two groups in any combination. Each combination has its own advantages and disadvantages.

NPC + NPC

NPC-and-NPC relationships are good for filling in the background of the game, and for setting up potential future storylines; for instance, if two NPCs "aren't right for each other," and a player character has shown interest in one of the NPCs. It is important to keep the NPCs true to their own motivations; a player character should not be able to simply swan in and break up a devoted NPC relationship just because the PC is interested in one of them. (Unless that's their superpower, but that's another matter.)

It's only natural that NPCs have their own backstories and relationships. The world turns and people lead their lives, whether or not the player characters are watching them. So, if the Fabulous Five's receptionist tells the team that he is getting married to the postal carrier and the team members are invited to the wedding, it adds to the feeling that the game world is a real place.

That said, just remember that the PCs are the stars of the show. You should never make the players sit back and just watch as you go into lengthy descriptions of your NPCs' love lives. NPC-and-NPC relationships are only really important to go into when it involves the player characters somehow, such as if the couple breaks up and makes one of the NPCs available, or one of the NPCs is kidnapped, or one of the NPCs is acting oddly because they are being mind-controlled. (But in the latter two cases, it's even more dramatic to kidnap or mind control a PC's NPC love interest, if one is available).

PC + NPC

PC-and-NPC relationships are the best for the GM as storytelling devices. NPC love interests have backstories that are not always completely known to the player characters, and they can get into all kinds of mischief

when they are "off screen"—trouble that the PC has to help get them out of, which is always good for drama.

But don't have the NPC act out of character to further the plot. NPC love interests should not have their core personalities and beliefs compromised to tell a story. Don't hand your intrepid reporter NPC love interest the "idiot ball" just because you want to move the plot in a certain direction. Give them solid, in-character reasons to do what they do.

In general, an NPC hero who is a member of the team should be just as useful as the player characters, although they shouldn't outshine them, and should be less likely to take the lead in group decision-making. But they can still catch the eye of a megalomaniacal villain who wants to abduct them and take them out for sushi, or hook them up to a giant power battery (depending on the villain), or have an old flame come back in town and stir up trouble. This gives the PC in the relationship the chance to act and confront how they feel about these events. Drama!

Most importantly. don't tell your players what their characters *feel*. As a GM you can set the tone of an encounter and create an NPC that you think is a perfect match for a particular PC, if that is what you want to do. But you cannot simply state "Your character now loves this NPC." Unless there are superpowers involved, that's always a mistake. Removing player agency, especially in romantic relationships, leads to resentment and bad feelings, and for some players it can even relate to real-life unpleasant experiences.

PC + PC

Romances between player characters relieve you of having to create, guide and monitor every facet of the relationship. But PC-and-PC relationships give you fewer GM-created plot hooks to use. You can still introduce external pressures on the relationship through the NPCs surrounding the characters. And if you're alert to opportunities presented by the PCs, you can still build plots around their romance.

ADULT SUPERHERO RELATIONSHIPS

Games involving love and romance are fine when underage players or player characters are involved so long as details stay age-appropriate for the group. It is vitally important *never* to go beyond anyone's comfort zone.

Anything involving actual sexual activity should be limited strictly to adult players and adult characters. Games featuring sexual plots and content should only be run when all parties involved are legal adults. If you, the players, their player characters, and the non-player characters involved are all legal adults, and the players have all given their consent to include such content in the game before-hand, then its full speed ahead.

RAPE

Never use or describe the act of rape in a game. And unlike romantic themes, don't open a group discussion about adding rape themes to your campaign. Most victims of sexual assault do not come forward, so it is impossible to know who at your table may have lived through such a horrible ordeal. Even asking each player in private is insufficient, since if someone who's undergone a traumatic experience won't speak publicly about it, they are unlikely to break their silence for a tabletop game. Don't put them in the position of having to deal with that again.

PREGNANCY

Not everyone considers pregnancy a part of romance-themed gaming, which is natural: Not everyone thinks about pregnancy as a consequence of real-life romance and sex. When discussing the possibility of romantic themes in your game, don't assume that all the players have the same opinions of pregnancy. Some might point to the continuing storyline of Mr. Fantastic and Invisible Girl as an example of integrating pregnancy and child-rearing into a superhero setting, but for others birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, miscarriages, babies, and the like are too real for a game.

And don't assume that their real-life opinions will be the same as their gaming desires: Players who're looking forward to having a baby in real-life might want their games to avoid that can of worries.

TEEN SUPERHERO RELATIONSHIPS

Teen sidekicks and high-school age superheroes are a staple of the comics genre, and teenagers are a staple of the romance genre. But "teen romance" operates on

slightly different rules than romance depicted between adults, and the same should hold true for your games.

Teenaged characters are great for romantic storytelling, because they have all those raging hormones! For teenagers, everything seems intense, immediate, and personal! When you're a teenager and things go wrong, you aren't just having a bad day; the world hates YOU, personally! You don't think you have a crush on a cute classmate, instead it's LOVE! And if you ask them out and they reject you, then it feels like it's the END OF THE WORLD! At least… for a few days.

Teenagers are often not as skilled or even willing to open themselves up for meaningful conversation as adults, instead operating on assumptions and emotions. There's a reason that William Shakespeare wrote both Romeo and Juliet as teenagers: Adults would not have poisoned themselves without talking to each other more clearly—and maybe thinking things through a bit better.

Teenagers are also more subject to the pressures of outside influences. They have to answer to their parents, who may not approve of their romantic partners. They have to see the same group of people at school every day during the school year, which makes it harder to ignore the people they don't like, and who may not like them. High school cliques, fashion disagreements, and even something like a two-year age difference seem like inescapable social divisions, whereas when you're an adult you're much freer to set your own course, make your own friends, ignore people you don't particularly care for (other than perhaps your boss), and as you grow older differences in age between adults become less and less important.

All of this makes teenaged characters seem perfect for romance storylines.

But as a GM, you have to be careful you don't step into potential problems, like making the players at your table uncomfortable by depicting underage characters engaging in adult activities. In the real world, the age of consent doesn't always prevent teenagers from having sex, but it should in your games. It may not be totally realistic, but it avoids alienating some players, or causing others whose personal history you may not know all the details of from having to relive something unpleasant from their past.

If a player or PC is underage but wants in-game romantic relationships, you can allow the *romance* part of age-appropriate relationships to develop naturally, but have circumstances always interrupt things when they start to go too far. If the underage player wants their character to hold hands, hug, or kiss their significant other, that's fine. But as soon as it looks like things may start going somewhere more serious, then something should happen to intrude: a parent comes home, or a cop shines a flashlight through the car window, or a pipe bursts in the basement right over the couch they're making out on… aliens invade… ninjas!... use your imagination! And remember, it's a superhero world, so the range of possibilities is literally endless.

This restriction can be lifted as those involved cross the line between legal minors and legal adults. When the original Teen Titans first appeared as a group in *The Brave and the Bold* in 1964, the characters were all teen sidekicks for adult superheroes, ranging from 13 to 16, and their stories were always kept to crime-fighting and action-adventure plotlines. It wasn't until the Teen Titans re-formed when the characters were all college age that romantic subplots began to be used.

CHILD/ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Some games may involve child players or child superheroes. The rule concerning depictions of romantic love between a child and an adult in roleplaying games is simple: Don't do it. Not after a discussion with the players. Not involving only NPCs or only PCs. Not with the details kept off-screen. *Never.*

2. Romantic Tropes

The comic book genre is rife with romantic tropes, recurring motifs, and literary and rhetorical devices that are often used for genre reinforcement. They can be a shorthand to let audiences know what to expect without delving into a detailed backstory. An example of this is the Black Hat; Just about anyone wearing a black cowboy hat in 1950s western movies was a villain, while anyone wearing a white hat was a hero.

Tropes aren't a part of a game's rules; a PC doesn't spend build points to become a Bad Girl and doesn't gain bonus points for being declared an alien's Perfect Mate (unless that's something the PC is competing to achieve). Instead, they're character- and story-shortcuts a GM can consider when planning a campaign, plotting adventures, creating NPCs, and describing the campaign to the players, and players can use when creating PCs.

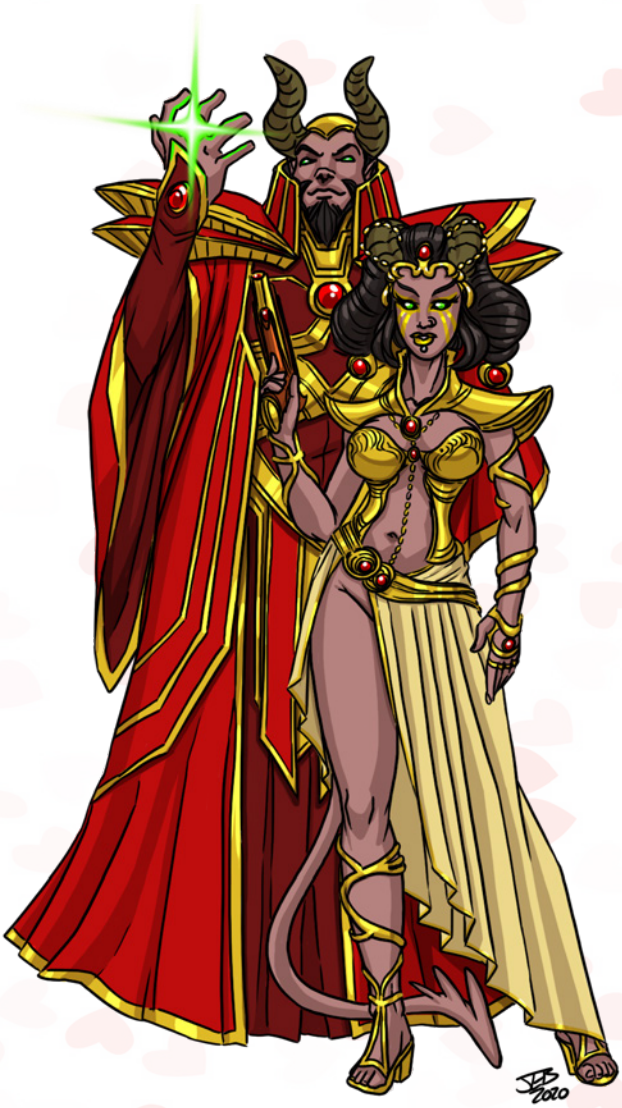
Some tropes are useful and can enhance the game's flavor. Others are objectively bad, and should be avoided. And like any other tool, even good tropes can be used poorly. Over-reliance on these shortcuts results in weak storytelling, while violating every trope in the genre can be seen as self-indulgent by the players.

But used judiciously, tropes can make for easy entry points for characters and plots in a game. There are many other tropes that can apply to a comics-based campaign, such as Good Always Triumphs, but this chapter only looks at those related to romance and sex in supers comics and games. Using a number of these tropes can help players feel the difference between a standard supers campaign and the romantic world of costumed heroes. You can even provide bonus points for players who engage with these tropes in the manner in which they are intended, leaning into the genre conventions of romantic comic subplots, as opposed to defying them.

It should also be pointed out that many of these tropes don't portray women in a favorable light. Until recent years, women in comics were trophy characters, romantic interests, and rarely featured as anything more than support characters to their male counterparts, and some romantic tropes reflect this. GMs should use such tropes sparingly—or ironically.

BAD GIRLS (BAD BOYS)

Especially popular in the comics of the 1990s, the Bad Girl trope features characters that are hyper-sexualized, have exaggerated builds, and typically wear unbelievably skimpy costumes (often accessorized with swords). The costumes are unbelievable, in that it is literally impossible to believe that their costumes would stay on. In this trope, these costumes often suffer damage leading to "wardrobe malfunctions" far more often than anyone else's, although in the comics, there are always conveniently placed things (locks of



hair, scraps of fabric, or wisps of smoke, for example) to barely cover them up and not violate the Comics Code. Bad Girls act unnecessarily provocatively and, as the name implies, they are usually villains or anti-heroes by nature.

A few such characters may be fine; the world is full of diverse peoples and some of them might be expected to act this way, especially if sexual undercurrents are part of the campaign. But if all of your female NPCs are Bad Girls, then there's a problem in your game, and you are likely alienating some players at your table.

Not all Bad Girl characters are necessarily bad characters, and with some thought given to motivations and goals they can be more than *just* a sexy look and a set of powers.

Bad Boys, on the other hand, don't usually wear skimpy costumes or have powers with sexual themes. Instead, they often look scruffy and unshaved, are impolite, have attitude problems (especially when it comes to authority figures), have socially unpopular habits (*e.g.*, smoking cigars indoors), and are willing to skirt or break the law in order to get the job done. Examples include Wolverine and Gambit from Marvel, and DC's John Constantine.

While sexuality isn't central to Bad Boys' costumes or powers, their love lives are central to their stories, as they somehow always seem to attract the interest of good girl supers.

Fated for Each Other/ Destined to Marry

A trope from early comics is each superhero having a specific love interest, and *only one* love interest. This trope endured from the Golden Age (roughly from 1938, with the introduction of Superman) to the end of the Silver Age (about 1975). Even though other women might appear in their comics, or seem interested, the character would always return to their true love, sometimes even marrying them.

The superheroes who defined this trope were male. Early comics were almost exclusively written, drawn, and published by men, and in the 1930s-1950s, female characters were often little more than accessories to the male characters—something to get a plot moving along, or someone who needed constant rescuing from kidnappers or from falling off buildings. Female superheroes were few, and, when included, were usually sidekicks or inserted as part of a team as "the girl."

Some characters, like Superman, were introduced as adults, but later had their "earlier adventures" retroactively added into their history. When Superman was in high school, he dated Lana Lang; and when he was in college, he was seen in the company of Lori Lemaris (a disguised Atlantean mermaid). But in every era, Clark has *one* and *only one* love interest—and, strangely, all of them have the same initials, L.L.—just like his nemesis, Lex Luthor.

Superman dated for over four decades before finally marrying Lois Lane, but fans *knew* the marriage was eventually going to happen, both in their hearts and because DC had dropped hints like a *Legion of Super-Heroes* story saying that in the 30th century the name of Superman's wife had been lost to history (but her initials were, of course, L.L.).

As for the Legionnaires themselves, a 1967 story, "The Adult Legion," showed which members of the group would die in the line of duty, get married, have children, join or leave the Legion. Therefore, when a Legionnaire who'd appeared in that story started dating, fans knew in advance whether the relationship would last—at least for the decade and a half before the writers announced that "The Adult Legion" had been an alternate future that would no longer guide the comic's storylines.

Examples of other long-running superheroes with long-running girlfriends include the Flash/Barry Allen and Iris West, the Hulk/Bruce Banner and Betsy Ross, and Green Lantern/Hal Jordan and Carol Ferris (although Ferris eventually became the recurring nemesis Star Sapphire). Wonder Woman/Diana Prince is almost always depicted as being romantically involved with Steve Trevor, although his appearances in the comics trailed off dramatically after the 1960s.

A Destined to Marry relationship can quickly get boring. Case in point, DC's Metamorpho (Rex Mason) was already engaged to Sapphire Stagg when the characters first appeared in 1965, but he postponed their wedding when he gained his superpowers, wanting to marry her as a normal man, not a "crazy mixed-up freak." Over the months she tried to convince Rex that she wanted to marry him whatever he looked like, even getting as far as a wedding ceremony that was interrupted by a super-emergency and never resumed. But in typical

soap opera style, Sapphire also at one point got engaged to another man to make Rex jealous, and later married a different man out of spite (in a relationship that lasted all of one issue). Add in a number of villains and other characters trying to tear the two of them apart (especially Sapphire's father, a lovesick sidekick who frequently threw sand in the gears of Rex and Sapphire's relationship in vain hopes of turning her eye towards him, and a superheroine who decided that *she* was destined to marry Metamorpho) and the comic had almost as many romance elements as it did superheroics—all in the space of three years.

(Of course, because they were Destined to Marry, after years of separations and reunions, Rex and Sapphire finally did wed in 1985, two decades after their engagement was introduced.)

Any story trope that leads to repetition and boredom is a bad idea in a tabletop game. If you create an NPC as *the* mandatory love interest for a character, rather than letting the player decide who their character is interested in, things can quickly devolve into the player feeling "railroaded." And even if the player says, "I want my character to have this person as a love interest," there are options other than the restrictions and permanence of this trope.

FOREVER DATING

The character who broke the Fated for Each Other mold was Marvel's Spider-Man. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created a teenaged superhero with realistic problems and realistic emotions. Despite being a nerdy "loser" in high school with no real friends,16-year-old Peter Parker ended up dating 19-year-old Betty Brant, a secretary at the *Daily Bugle* where he had a part-time job. But they broke up and Peter began dating "the prettiest girl in school," Liz Allen. After Liz Allen, Peter went on a blind date with Mary Jane Watson, a professional model with a vivacious, self-confident personality and a habit of calling him "Tiger." But Peter saw her as a vapid party girl, and moved on to Gwen Stacy, whom he dated through much of his college years.

After Gwen's death at the hands of the Green Goblin, Peter and M.J. began dating again. By then Peter had become more self-confident, and Mary Jane had begun to take things more seriously, and they seemed a better fit. But when Peter proposed to her, she said "No." Peter eventually began a relationship with the Black Cat/Felicia Hardy. Their relationship was rocky, as Black Cat was a cat burglar and Spider-Man was a crime-fighter. Felicia went straight, and all went well for a while, but she preferred Spider-Man over the mundane Peter Parker. The couple broke up, and not long afterward, Peter began seeing Mary Jane again.

And breaking the Forever Dating trope, this time Peter and M.J. remained together and eventually married (although that, of course, wasn't the end of the story).

Of course, the Forever Dating trope can be taken too far, as seen in the love-life of Tony Stark (Iron Man), who dated casually and seriously, negligently and passionately, suavely and carelessly. His playboy lifestyle set him up to be seduced by more than one femme fatale over the years, but he never managed to settle into a permanent relationship with any woman.

For player characters in a supers campaign, being open to more than one love interest means more opportunities for you to add complications to situations without the messiness of adultery, divorce, and custody battles, and allows the player and PC to explore more possible relationships before settling down with one significant other.

HEROES AND VILLAINS IN RELATIONSHIPS

A time-honored trope in the superhero genre is the hero who's in a romantic relationship with one of their own rogues gallery. This arrangement has a lot of good dramatic potential, with the hero having to decide between adhering to their crime-fighting code of ethics and their feelings for someone from the other side. The player must decide how far their character is willing to go to protect their character's love interest from the consequences of their life of crime: Does the hero let them go after catching them? Do they remove evidence from crime scenes? Do they even break them out of prison? Such a relationship can be a slippery slope for the hero's ethics.

Setting up this kind of relationship is tricky, especially in a roleplaying game. A comic book writer can simply decide that Character A is going to fall in love with Character B, but it's much harder for a GM to arrange. Pay attention to how your players react when certain villains make an appearance; if the player finds the villain attractive, then it's a good bet that their character

will, too. Also, talk to the player to see if they are open to the idea. You don't have to tell them who the intended paramour is if you don't want to, but it will help things along greatly if the player knows that the option is arriving soon.

If you want a player character in your game to have a flirty, on-again, off-again relationship with a villain, you should carefully read the PC's listed background and flaws.

For this kind of relationship to work, it is crucial that there are certain lines that are not crossed.

The most important one is that the supervillain in question cannot ever have committed a murder that the hero knows about. For example, Batman/Bruce Wayne has a long-standing relationship with Catwoman/Selina Kyle, but that only works so long as Catwoman restricts her activities to crimes of trespassing and property theft. Likewise, his intimate relationship with Talia al Ghul began back when she was written as simply Ra's al Ghul's daughter, before later writers decided to turn her into a super-assassin. Because of Batman's iron-clad code against killing, it makes no sense for him to engage in a relationship with a serial murderer for hire. It can happen in comics because the writers decided it was going to, but in a tabletop game, Batman's player would have to jump through some serious mental hoops to explain away the apparent double-standard.

Spider-Man/Peter Parker and Black Cat/Felicia Hardy have a very similar relationship to that of Batman and Catwoman. Black Cat is less of a thief and more of a thrill-seeker, making it a bit easier for her to switch over to the side of the good guys; because Black Cat can still enjoy other aspects of the costumed lifestyle, whereas Catwoman derives enjoyment from pitting her thieving skills against the "world's greatest detective" and stealing anything cat-shaped she comes across. But Spider-Man would not be willing to have anything to do with Black Cat if she was a known killer.

It can also help if you can connect the hero and the villain socially outside of their costumed identities. If a hero is already in a romantic relationship, having their significant other undergo an accident or forced experiment that both grants them superpowers and makes them unaware of the actions of their new, villainous persona is a great way to get this ball rolling. This is what happened with Green Lantern/Hal Jordan's longtime love interest, Carol Ferris. Originally, she's a normal person, daughter of the founder of Ferris Aircraft, where Jordan worked as a test pilot. She's abducted by alien Zamarons, who force her to wear a power ring like Green Lantern's, but which also houses the spirit of their queen. Ferris acts as a host body for the queen, who calls herself Star Sapphire. Even after she is defeated and the ring removed, the Star Sapphire persona resurfaces sporadically, each time giving her the powers and persona of his nemesis. Hal's love for Carol won't let him abandon her to the clutches of the Zamarons, nor to the legal consequences of her actions when she's under Star Sapphire's spell.

Relationships between heroes and villains do not have to be deeply romantic or serious to still make use of this kind of storyline. In Marvel Comics, Invisible

Chapter 2: Romantic Tropes

Woman/Sue Storm is clearly physically attracted to the Sub-Mariner/Namor, and he is clearly attracted to her. Namor crossed back and forth between anti-hero, hero, and villain many times over the years; he began his career in comics as anti-American, and then turned anti-Nazi when the USA entered World War II. He is depicted as vain, temperamental, and arrogant. He has led attacks on the "surface world" at the head of the armies of Atlantis more than once. He is, basically, a monumental jerk. And yet when the Fantastic Four need something from him, they send Sue Storm to talk to him, because their mutual attraction gives her an advantage in negotiations. But the very existence of this relationship, consummated or not (that varies from continuity to continuity), places a strain on her serious, long-term commitment to her husband, Reed Richards. Needless to say, Richards is not a huge fan of Namor. Drama abounds!

Another factor the superhero/supervillain couple must consider is whether to let anyone know about their involvement. If the supervillain is currently wanted for crimes, then dating a superhero is going to be bad for both—if it gets out. Other supervillains will be much less likely to trust the villain or want to work with them for fear the villain might be working undercover for the heroes now. Some of their former colleagues might even decide to kidnap them to use as leverage against the hero, or worse. By the same token, the heroic half of the couple might face some serious backlash from the superhero community and from law enforcement, who might begin to question the hero's ethics and reliability, demand that they turn over their lover to face justice, or believe that the hero's being used by the villain.

The important thing for you as a GM is to figure out what would motivate the player character to see the villain NPC as more than just an enemy to be defeated and incarcerated. You don't necessarily have to have this in mind when you create the villain; listening to how your players talk about the bad guys they encounter can show you the spark you need to start this kind of relationship. But talking to your players is a much more reliable way of making this storyline work. Some players like to have a lot of control over their character's destiny; others less so, in which case they might not want to pre-ordain any relationship. But just bringing it up at all may make them more open to the idea and more aware of hints that the NPC is interested.

HEROIC BUILD

Some things seem to come along with superpowers. No, not responsibility. We're talking about a great body! This is, by far, the most common superhero trope; so common that most artists, readers, and gamers don't notice the bias in the representation.

Metahumans, by whatever name they are called, all seem to be stronger and healthier than non-powered bystanders, even if they have powers that don't

"MAN OF STEEL, WOMAN OF KLEENEX"

In 1969, author Larry Niven wrote a satirical essay about the problems that Superman would have engaging in sexual intercourse with a non-powered human woman. He suggested that because Superman is so overwhelmingly powerful in every aspect of his being, the human woman would be killed in the process. He even proposed that if he were to masturbate, his sperm would act like millions of heat-seeking bullets, each one flying off in search of a womb.

Don't introduce this sort of complication into a game. Not just because it's tacky, childish, and crude, but because it's a violation of the genre. With very few exceptions, superheroes are in control of their powers. Those whose powers are not under their control, like Captain Atom, Cyclops, or Rogue, have had an accident, injury, or traumatic event in their history that explains why they cannot control their powers. Niven wrote the essay to poke fun at Superman at a time when his powers included things like "super-typing" and "mind-fogging super-kisses." We've all moved on since then.

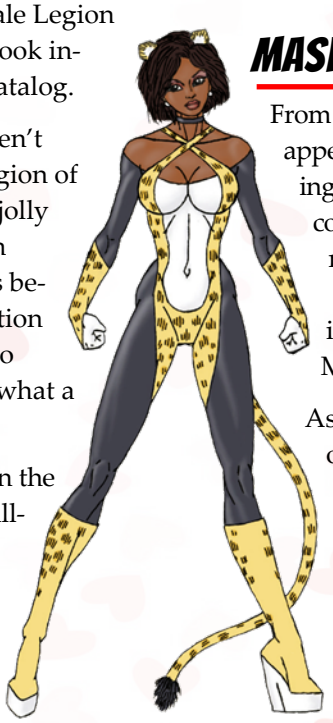
require them to be particularly physically active, like telepathy or energy projection.

Female supers in the comics often have large breasts without suffering any of the real-world negative effects of being top-heavy. Super-suits cling and conform to their shape to show them off, and their breasts never seem to accidentally fall out, no matter how acrobatic their activity. And both male and female costumes tend to show more skin than would be comfortable in an overly air-conditioned building—1970s female Legion of Super-Heroes costumes looked like they took inspiration from a Frederick's of Hollywood catalog.

(There are always outliers, but even those aren't necessarily positive. Bouncing Boy in the Legion of Super-Heroes matches the stereotype of the jolly fat man. And the *Watchmen*'s Rorschach is an odd-looking man under his mask, but that is because *Watchmen* was written as a deconstruction of the superhero genre, and he was created to be a subversion of audience expectations of what a hero should be.)

The main reasons for this trope are laziness on the part of the characters' creators, and wish-fulfillment directed at the audience. But acceptable appearance has evolved somewhat in recent years. In the *Wild Cards* novels, one of the most powerful characters is The Amazing Bubbles, a fashion-model before she gained her superpowers, who absorbs kinetic energy into her body as fat in order to power the energy bubbles she can release. While she has self-image problems in her first appearance, she eventually comes to terms with it, over time becoming a role model for young girls in that setting. And some comics companies are moving away from earlier unrealistic costuming themes, creating functional costumes like those seen in recent superhero genre movies.

There's no reason why an RPG campaign featuring players in a variety of body types and appearances can't be inclusive, and no reason you need to fall into this offensive trope once made aware of its pervasive existence.



MASKLESS

From the outside looking in, being a superhero appears to be an awesome gig. You get amazing powers and you can walk down the street confident that you're a mugger's worst nightmare waiting to happen. Most PC superheroes are local celebrities, but even if the local news asks if you're "A Hero or a Menace?" you still have a lot going for you.

As a result, some superheroes are publicly open about who they really are. This has some advantages, such as when dealing with government agencies or when trying to cash a reward check made out simply to Major Meteor. But it also has drawbacks, leading most superheroes to adopt a secret identity.

THE MASQUERADE

Your super-identity being public knowledge has its advantages, except when a crazy with an axe to grind shows up at your house to kill you at 3 o'clock in the

morning, or when every meal you eat out with family or friends is seen by your enemies as an invitation to take them hostage.

This is why most superheroes choose to lead a double life: one as a costumed superhero, and one as a "typical citizen." This way they are immediately recognizable by the public in their heroic persona, so that people who need them will know to come to them for help, but aren't constantly putting their loved ones at risk. Basically, it gives the hero peace of mind.

But maintaining a secret identity can be a lot of work. Juggling your work responsibilities, keeping your secret, and still being an effective crime-fighter is a balancing act. Holding down a 9-to-5 job is hard when you might have to duck out to stop crime in the middle of your work shift. If you're not independently wealthy, you may have to take employment you don't necessarily want because that's the only way to have the freedom to come and go when needed. Some jobs, like private eye or bicycle delivery person, get you into the middle of things easily. Others, like a work-at-home job, freelance photographer, or exotic dancer, give you more schedule flexibility.

But no matter what your character does for a living, even if you decide that they are "professionally rich," your character still has to lie to the people around them. A lot. And that can put a serious strain on romantic relationships, in particular. Long hours or missing work, coming home with unexplained bruises and injuries, having to duck out in the middle of a date or missing a date entirely, are all part and parcel of being a superhero with a secret identity. As a player, you should expect these things to arise. As a GM, you should be ready to put the PCs on the spot like that from time to time. It's inconvenient for the character, but it can lead to drama and in-game comedy. It shouldn't happen every session, but occasionally having to actively maintain The Masquerade reinforces that being a superhero comes with sacrifices.

Similarly, the player character superhero should occasionally be faced with the dilemma of whether to disclose their identity to anyone. The more people who know, the greater the chance that someone might slip and reveal the secret. But keeping their identity hush-hush means having to lie to the people they care about. Again, this quandary can lead to dramatic roleplaying.

THE PERFECT MATE

Every now and then, a supervillain or an alien (usually a prince or princess) decides to find the Perfect Mate, that special someone who will provide them with the DNA that is most complementary to their own, to create the perfect child—whether the selected mate wants to or not.

A classic example of this concept is Paragon, aka Her, who first appeared in Marvel Comics in 1977. She was an artificial being who discovered that the male artificial being she was created to be with, Adam Warlock (aka Him), had died. So, she rounded up a bunch of Earth heroes and made them fight each other (inconclusively) to see who was worthy to be her partner. The most famous DC Comics parallel is Maxima, whose appearances usually involve her showing up on Earth and trying (unsuccessfully) to force Superman to become her mate.

Alien superbeings are not the only ones who fall under this trope. The person looking for their perfect match

can be a mad scientist seeking just the right mix of DNA for their next creation, an artificially intelligent robot who was made for a particular individual (either by a misguided friend or by an enemy), a supervillain who has a fixation on a player character, *etc.*

Care must be taken with this trope not to cross into the realm of rape. These villains can be so obsessed with their own agenda that they don't care whether the object of their desire consents. A perfect example of what *not* to do is *Avengers* #200, in 1980, in which a powerful female character—who was literally created to be a feminist icon—Ms. Marvel, was mind-controlled and subjugated, resulting in a mysterious three-day pregnancy with an unknown father, the child (who was also, through time travel, his own father) growing to adulthood in a matter of hours and then using his powers to make Ms. Marvel fall in love with him.

If you want to use the Perfect Mate concept in a game, it works best if the person pursuing their "perfect match" is making an offer, not a demand. Most of these Perfect Mate storylines involve the instigator seeking someone to produce ideal offspring with, but sometimes they are just wanting someone to spend their life with. Offering wondrous rewards to the winner of a voluntary contest to prove their worth as a mate is not likely to bring up bad memories or offend any players.

Another option is for the mate-obsessed alien to pose as a "mere mortal" and then try to insinuate themselves into the life of the player character of their choice. This can still be a tricky line to walk, however, and it is best if you have the NPC out themselves somehow before anything permanent (like marriage or kids) happens. That way the PC can give informed consent.

PRETTY FACES

In parallel with their Heroic Builds (see page 16), superheroes (male and female) are almost universally handsome. Their non-powered romantic interests share this trait—even the ones who protest that they're ugly or plain looking.

Again, the primary reason for this is likely laziness on the part of comics artists, as exemplified by the Mike Grell era of the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, when almost the only way you could tell the tall, lean, muscled and identical male Legionnaires apart was by the length of their 1970s sideburns.

Supervillains are similarly attractive, but some artists use ugly appearance as a shorthand for evil, *e.g.*, the Toad, the Blob, the Red Ghost. Most evil henchmen drawn by Jack Kirby are craggy and missing at least a few teeth, and you can often identify the villainess in the crowd by her perpetual angry face—at least when she's not trying to seduce a hero.

In extreme cases imperfect looks can be the *cause* of supervillainy. In the Silver Age, one of the reasons Lex Luthor hated Superman was that Lex blamed him for a lab accident that caused all of Lex's hair to all fall out. (Later rewrites gave Lex stronger motivations, thankfully.) In *Fantastic Four #1* the Moleman was driven to live underground and become a supervillain because he couldn't get a date or a job with his unhandsome appearance. And four issues later, Victor von Doom was disfigured in a lab accident and decided that, since his looks were now ruined, while he was crafting himself a suit of powered armor to destroy the man he held responsible (Reed Richards), he might as well just slap the faceplate on while it was still red-hot, permanently scarring his entire face.

While players certainly have the option of having pretty PCs, you shouldn't make good or bad looks a universal for NPCs.

Chapter 2: Romantic Tropes

PUBERTY POWERS

Teen heroes (and villains) can come into their powers in several different ways: a character can be born with super abilities, powers can come to a group of kids who happen to be at the site of an accident that has mutagenic effects, or sometimes they come to kids who are bitten by radioactive creatures.

But for teen characters especially, many gain their superpowers during puberty. Comics companies like this trope, since it lets pre-teen and teenaged readers identify more strongly with the character, and that demographic is a primary target of comic books.

Characters of this age typically have more free time than their parents, and they have a lot of options for their future available to them, making them perfect candidates for superpowered adventurers. Games focusing on PCs whose powers emerge during puberty allow the GM to use those powers—and how awkward and different they make the characters feel—as an allegory for how self-conscious and out-of-place everyone feels at that age. Imagine the embarrassment of a boy's voice cracking—and causing all glass within a 30-foot radius to also crack. Most teenagers feel like they don't really fit in anywhere or that they need to hide some emerging aspect of themselves, and gaining powers just "cranks that up to 11."

Accidental mutations can occur at any time in a superheroic character's life, but it makes sense that in a naturally occurring strain of metahumans (or aliens), powerful abilities would wait until the changes inherent in puberty to manifest. Young children are not known for their self-control or emotional restraint, and they could easily injure or kill the people around them if they have access to unchecked superpowers. (The Golden Age adventures of Clark Kent as Superbaby are no longer considered part of the official Superman history.)

Teenagers, though, also have impulse-control problems, and for super teens it can become a life-changing struggle. Staring daggers at a rival isn't permissible if your powers include matter manifestation, keeping your wings/scales/over-muscled body hidden is difficult when peer pressure intensifies, and the desire to show off a cool power is in constant tension with the need to maintain a secret identity.

SECRET SEXUALITY

Comics have a romantic trope that doesn't have an exact analog in the real world: Secret Sexuality. This doesn't mean having sex and keeping it a secret (like having an affair) or giggling rumors about what went on behind the closed doors of stately Wayne Manor between millionaire Bruce Wayne and his faithful ward Dick Grayson, but the revelation of past love interests and sexual activity that hadn't even been hinted at when they supposedly happened.

As a successful comic book's run can last decades, with multiple changes of creative teams, things are frequently changed to keep the story "fresh": a character's costume, their superpowers, or even romantic preference, sexual orientation, or gender identity—especially if a character's run started under the Comics Code Authority but extended into the post-Code era. And unlike in the real world, in comics anything that hasn't already been shown to the audience can be created in the present, and then revealed to the readers as established fact (as opposed to a "retcon," or retroactive continuity, when the past is rewritten without concern for what's gone before).

Usually, the revelation is minor. For instance, T'Challa/Black Panther's first comic book appearance was in *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966) and Storm of the X-Men's first appearance was in *Giant-Size X-Men #1* (1975). Their first joint appearance was in *Marvel Team-Up* #100 (1980), but in that story a flashback reveals that they'd *actually* met years before either of those first appearances, when they were pre-teens and she'd foiled an attempt to kidnap the young prince. They'd fallen in love, but he had to leave her at the end of the flashback story to pursue his destiny in Wakanda. And at the end of the *Marvel Team-Up* story, they again wistfully parted. The 1980 story was an interesting addition to the previously unrevealed backstories of both characters, but didn't have any real effect on them or their ongoing storylines—until they were romantically reunited two decades later.

Sometimes the revelation can add an immediate plot opportunity, as when it was revealed in *Avengers* #43 (1967) that the Black Widow had been married sometime before her first comics appearance, and that the husband she'd thought years dead was actually alive, and trained as a Soviet super soldier: the Red Guardian.

In other cases the revelation can have immediate and continuing consequences. In 2015 a long-running Marvel Comics character, Bobby Drake/Iceman of the X-Men, was revealed to be gay; not to have *turned* gay, but to have been gay all along.

Now, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee were creating *The X-Men #1* in 1963, they didn't sit down and say, "Let's come up with a character who'll date girls for decades, and then sometime in the far future, after one of us is dead and the other is no longer directly involved in the company, some other writer and artist, who weren't even born when the character was created, will reveal our most secretest of secrets about the guy."

But Brian Michael Bendis and Mahmud Asrar revealed Iceman's true sexual orientation in *All New X-Men #40*; they took advantage of elements that already existed in Drake's life story. While he'd dated women over the years, he'd never had a long, serious, *successful* relationship. He's come from an oppressive, bigoted family and learned to repress his powers, views, and dreams around them. So, it wasn't too big of a stretch to declare that Drake's unsuccessful lovelife was a result of one more act of repression.

If you're introducing romance elements into an ongoing supers campaign, Secret Sexuality revelations can be used to explain why there hadn't been much evidence of romance or sex previously in the campaign. And in any romance-using superhero game, the Secret Sexuality trope means changes can be made to a PC's romantic background (usually at the player's instigation, or at the very least with their input and permission) with a flashback story, a surprise encounter, an introspective interlude, or any other break in the storyline that a player can seize upon for a change in direction.

SUPERHERO LOVERS

In a lot of games that include love and romance, superhero PCs find themselves drawn toward other superheroes, especially their teammates. There is nothing wrong with this, and if two (or more) players decide that their characters are going to become romantically linked, then that's fine, provided that the players can handle playing the relationship maturely and in a way that does not make other players uncomfortable. There are lots of ways for you to involve them in romance-themed plotlines. Just be careful that your story does not involve removing one of them from play for any substantial length of time.

There are several reasons why superheroes become attracted to each other. People going through high-stress situations together, especially ones involving actual physical danger, often form lasting emotional bonds. These aren't always romantic in nature, but we're all familiar with the idea of people in high-risk occupations, like cops and soldiers, feeling like their units are their "second family."

Many superheroes come to feel like other heroes are the only people that they can open up to, the only ones who will understand the things they experience. Many super-team members know each other's secret identities, so they don't have to hide who they really are from one another. It's practically inevitable that they feel attracted to one another. But while the military and police precincts usually have rules regulating fraternization within the ranks, most super-teams do not.

Because their experiences are so outside the norm, many superheroes may be more open to alternative lifestyles. As a GM, it's not your job to impose restrictions on the kinds of relationships formed between PCs, beyond the bounds of them being consenting adults.

And even if you have carefully crafted an NPC as a romantic partner for one of the PCs and you were *just* about to introduce them, don't try to pull the PCs apart and then introduce the NPC. That will only lead to the players feeling railroaded, and nobody wants that. If you must, you can try to introduce your NPC as an alternative option for the PC. Even better, you can try to build a friendly relationship between the NPC and the PC who is the *other* half of the new couple. This could lead to a love triangle-type situation, which has all manner of possibilities for drama. After all, in the comics, Archie has been trying to decide between Betty and Veronica for years!

Your custom-crafted NPC can also work as a foil, becoming a romantic rival to the PC who currently has the affections of the player character they were created to be involved with. This rivalry can be as friendly or vicious as you need it to be; just be careful not to have the NPC do anything so over the top that it drives a wedge between them and the PC they are trying to win over.

The biggest potential downside to romance within the team is what happens if the romance falls apart. (Nothing quite like having to see your ex at work every day, right?) But even if the worst happens, and it's a bad breakup, it's best as a GM not to interfere unless you absolutely must. Breakups are a part of real life, of the comics, and of soap-opera style superhero drama. Unless the players are taking their PCs' breakup too personally, or are making everyone else at the table uncomfortable, let the players and PCs work things out for themselves. And if you *did* have a custom-made NPC ready in the wings that you haven't yet introduced, wait at least a few sessions after the character split, and then spring them on the PC they were intended for.

Feel free to have old exes re-enter their lives, and have new people make passes at the PCs; that's just part of romantic-themed storytelling. How the player characters react can be great drama fodder. Just be careful to engage all the PCs equally, and never force a player's character to take an action that the players don't want them to.

Tantric Magic and Other Sexually Charged Powers

Tantric magic, or "sex magic," is an ancient mystic tradition that originated in the Middle East and China. Real-world practitioners believe that they can harness and use the energy of sexual arousal or orgasm, along with visualization of a desired result, to cast spells. Traditional tantric mages engage in sexual activity, but rather than allow themselves to reach orgasm, they channel that energy into themselves as a kind of battery to fuel their spells.

In most Western fiction featuring it, including adult-themed comics, the sex magic superpower works much like any other power that has limited uses or runs off a battery, but the mage must engage in sexual activity to recharge the supply. Tantric powers in comics often include an aspect of pleasure or emotion control. This does not prevent some of the more powerful tantric-themed superheroes and villains from doing things like creating force barriers or firing energy bolts; some tantric-themed characters can use the tantric energy to create whatever spell effects they wish.

Needless to say, tantric-themed characters in superhero settings tend to be promiscuous. Some may engage in serial monogamy, but most tend to be "party people" who either go clubbing frequently or surround themselves with a small sect of followers who revitalize them; Fortunato in the *Wild Cards* novels ran a high-class prostitution ring, so that he'd always have access to sex when he needed to recharge. Unless all the players specifically agree to it, it's best if tantric characters in your game group replenish their batteries off-screen.

Teen Teams

Teen heroes must navigate the maze of their home life, school, and being a superhero all at the same time. In some games, a teen hero will be the only one at their school. Other games might revolve around a school for superheroes, or a school for teaching anyone with superpowers how to control them, regardless of whether the student plans to become a hero, a villain, or just a person with powers—the movie *Sky High* is an example of the latter. While a school for teenaged supers isn't likely to send them out on officially sanctioned operations, it is possible that the player characters might form their own team covertly, sneaking out to engage in superheroics when the principal isn't looking.

The presence of a teen hero in a group of adult heroes can be awkward. If the player characters' team is legally sanctioned by the government, then the teenage hero is unlikely to be able to officially join for legal reasons, unless they can manage to become legally emancipated (and possibly not even then). Romance with adult team members could be inappropriate, which is why most teen heroes who are not solo heroes form teams of other super teens.

The Unwritten Rules

The Unwritten Rules are an informal code of conduct governing interaction between costumed heroes, villains, and non-powered thugs and agents. Some of these are boundaries set during the Session Zero discussion about what is, and is not, acceptable for the table (see page 8). Other Unwritten Rules grow out of how mainstream comics themselves treat certain topics. If your game group agrees to dispense with them, so be it, but these conventions exist for a reason.

A simple example is that even though we have DNA testing and facial recognition software now, it's a genre

convention that wearing a mask and gloves when adventuring, and making an effort to keep your identity secret, will keep the authorities and your enemies from finding out who you are. It's poor form to have an NPC simply uncover a PC superhero's secret identity without it being part of a major plotline, and without some reason why that NPC would not broadcast that information to the world. Even if a secret identity is blown, if the player isn't ready for their PC to go public, then there should be some way out, even if it's as unlikely as the NPC not believing their own evidence. In the Post-Crisis DC Comics continuity, Lex Luthor set a team of operatives to discover Superman's secret identity, and when he was told it was Clark Kent, he absolutely refused to believe his own operatives; he fired them for incompetence.

A much more significant rule is that even the worst supervillains in games should never outright kill captured superheroes. They may threaten to, they may even plan to, but somehow, something will always prevent them from doing so. Villains can inconvenience heroes in many ways, but the actual death of a player character superhero should always be a rare and significant event. Having a mook, or even a major villain, casually take out a superhero or a significant NPC with a sniper rifle, even if logical and feasible, is a massive genre violation, and is sure to anger those at your table.

Similarly, creepy tentacle monsters and villains with mind-control powers may threaten to sexually violate characters—and only if your players have specifically okayed that possibility in advance—but it should never actually happen in game, especially on screen. If you feel you absolutely must have a villain guilty of committing such acts, then you should always try to imply it, rather than explicitly describing it. A good example of this is the way that Immortan Joe and his "wives" are depicted in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. We never see any outright sexual abuse taking place, but it is clearly implied by the setting. Never show it in game.

WOMEN IN REFRIGERATORS

This trope refers to the worst form of sexism in comics, the maiming or killing of female characters as a means of motivating male heroes.

Barbara Gordon being shot and paralyzed by the Joker in 1988's *Batman: The Killing Joke* graphic novel, is an example of this trope. The Joker committed the crime specifically to traumatize a male character (her father, Jim Gordon), and did not know much or care about who Barbara was; the Joker had no idea that she was also Batgirl. She was objectified by him into a mere means to an end.

The trope didn't get its name until a 1994 storyline in which a Green Lantern named Kyle Rainer came home to find his girlfriend, Alexandra DeWitt, murdered and her body literally stuffed into his refrigerator. The story caused a massive outcry. Comic book writer Gail Simone coined the term "Women in Refrigerators" (now sometimes shortened to "fridging") to highlight the brutality and sexism of this trope. While an attack on a player character's loved ones will spur them to want revenge, this is going too far, especially because such things almost always happen to female characters.

And the lesson apparently not learned, DC's *Identity Crisis* in 2004 involved rape, murder, mind-control, and the rewriting of some (mostly female) characters to fit a contrived and unpleasant plot.

The problem with these stories is not that female characters shouldn't ever have bad things happen to them. But if the story wouldn't make sense if a completely different woman was swapped into the story or if the genders of the characters were reversed, then maybe the story needs to be reworked.

For instance, both of Batman/Bruce Wayne's parents were murdered in Crime Alley, but the Waynes were not targeted specifically because they were related to Bruce (since he was not Batman yet), and it happened as part of the character's formative backstory instead of turning existing characters into props.

3. The Wide World of Relationships

In the context of a roleplaying game, a player may be able to initiate a one-night stand or ask someone out on a first date through a simple skill check, but establishing a real connection should take more effort. As a player, you could think of ways that your PC will keep the relationship moving forward, and as a GM you can keep track of how well relationships between PCs and NPCs are going.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LOVE, LUST, OBSESSION, AND ROMANCE

LOVE is a word with numerous meanings, but here it means romantic love—usually, but not necessarily, including physical intimacy. It's possible to feel both platonic and romantic love for someone; for example, you could fall in romantic love with someone who had up until then been one of your closest friends.

Love is a tricky thing. You can't just roll a die or "push the right buttons" and *make* someone fall in love with you. People aren't robots, and even if you feel like you love someone with all your heart, that does not mean that they will automatically feel the same way about you. Sexual attraction can help jump-start a relationship, but real love requires deeper feelings. Love needs chemistry and connections—and in an RPG some level of a *story*.

Connections that can lead to love can take time to form. Time spent together and shared experiences (good and sometimes bad if they help each other through it) can build and strengthen a relationship.

But sometimes people have an immediate chemistry with one another, becoming "instant best friends." This is where the idea of "love at first sight" comes from.

In a tabletop RPG, chemistry is not much of an issue. If a player decides that their PC has fallen in love with another character upon first meeting them, that is their business. When the player decides who their PC is interested in, the GM or other player decides if that interest is immediately reciprocated, if there is room for something to grow, or if the character is just flatly uninterested.

An NPC doesn't have to be created as a perfect match for a PC in order to become their romantic partner. For instance, if a player wants to roleplay a developing relationship, they can ask the GM whether the NPC of interest has the same hobbies as the PC. Even if the GM didn't originally have that on the NPC's character sheet, a smart GM will pencil in that hobby (or at least an openness to it) and see where things go from there.

Even if the GM hadn't planned much for the NPC, this flexibility can sometimes lead to a throwaway NPC becoming a major love interest for a player character and/or an important recurring character.

A GM should *never* flatly tell a player that their PC has fallen in love

with someone, without letting the player know that there are mind-affecting powers at play. Even then the GM should get the player's permission for the story to proceed, and then should be careful not to let the story take the PC into the realm of actual assault.

LUST is pure sexual desire, often based on physical attractiveness. Models, pornographers, exotic dancers, prostitutes, advertising executives, and some super-spies rely on lust as part of their profession.

Finding someone physically attractive influences how most people react and how clearly they think in that person's presence. Which is not to say that looking good gives a character the power to control those around them; influence only goes so far. And people in healthy, committed relationships are better able to resist the effects of external lust than single people.

OBSESSION happens when lust and love take a dark turn. When someone is obsessed with someone else, thoughts of that person intrude on their mind frequently, often at inappropriate times. The obsessed person continually wonders where the object of their desire is, what they are doing, and if someone else is with them.

Obsession often leads to objectification of the other person; they become a treasure to be guarded or a trophy to be won at any cost.

Obsession is never a good thing. PCs who spend build points on their appearance are particularly likely to be targeted by obsessive villains, but it can happen to anyone. The obsessed person will often see themself as the hero of the story, the underdog who has to prove their devotion or worthiness to the object of their passion. They may stalk, harass, kidnap, or sexually assault the object of their infatuation—possibly even kill them—because they feel the rules don't apply to them. An obsessed person won't easily take "no" for an answer, rationalizing any rebuff : "Her Golden League buddies made her say that."

ROMANCE is the feeling of mystery and excitement associated with love. Romantic gestures are a means of expressing or heightening those feelings, showing the other person that you value them, that you want them to be happy, and that you want to spend time with them doing things that make them feel appreciated.

Any time people in love demonstrate that love for one another—walking together, holding hands, sharing a meal, or going somewhere together to enjoy the scenery—can be romantic. Giving a gift to someone because you expect to get something in return isn't romantic (although they might be fooled). But giving someone a gift because you want them to be happy, just to express to them how much you love them, can be very romantic; and if you get to see the look of surprise and happiness on their face, so much the better. The universe of romantic gestures open to characters with superpowers is broad, but remember: If the NPC loves the *person* and not the *powers*, little gestures can be as romantic as literally flying the NPC to the Moon.

SEX, GENDER, AND IDENTITY

In a game involving love and romance, it is important for players and GMs to give some thought to characters' orientation, sex, gender, and identity. The GM does not necessarily need to work all of this out in advance for every single NPC, but each player should know each of these elements for their PC. There are a lot more possibilities than "man or woman; gay or straight," but it doesn't have to be complicated to figure out who you want your player character to be. And while it's likely most players will have cisgender heterosexual PCs, players and GMs should be aware of the options that the game presents.

The three categories Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity describe different aspects of who a person is, both physically and psychologically. (Sexual Orientation, which deals with a person's relationship with others, is dealt with in the next section.)

SEX (or "biological sex") is a descriptive label that is usually assigned at birth, based on body parts (like genitals), hormones, and genes—usually "female" or "male," but there are some people who do not fit clearly into those categories, and they are labeled "intersex."

Assigned females and males make up about 98% of the population, and the majority of those assignments align with the person's self-image for life. However, a person's assigned sex at birth might *not* align with what is going on within their body as they develop, or how they grow to feel about themselves and identify as they get older.

If someone's assigned sex, gender, and gender identity align, they have no problem fitting into a society where this is the norm. For someone who does not have these elements align, it can make life very complicated—or

even dangerous, in societies that oppress non-conformity or deny its existence.

INTERSEX people are born with a combination of male and female traits, which can make it difficult for a doctor to assign their sex at birth. Being intersex is often treated as a medical problem, resulting in "corrective" surgery of infants in order to reassign them as males or females. As a result, many people don't discover that they are intersex until they reach puberty.

GENDER is a set of expectations a society sets for its members, typically masculine and feminine, aligning closely with the male and female sexes. Every culture has its own rules and its beliefs about how its genders should act, how they should interact with one another, how they're expected to dress, behave, and communicate, and what professions or other roles are appropriate to each gender (with some being gender-neutral).

Some cultures legally restrict one gender more than another, often viewing sex (determined by anatomy, chromosomes, and biology) and gender (a set of societal expectations and standards) as the same thing. These laws are often antiquated and harmful. For example, in Victorian England, women could own personal items, but they could not own real estate, or own or operate their own businesses. Women in the United States were not legally allowed to open their own bank accounts until 1960!

Historically, many cultures have encouraged men to be aggressive (*e.g.*, hunters and warriors) and women to be domestic (*e.g.*, gatherers and child-rearers), and these roles were reflected in the Comics Code Authority era rules. Many modern societies are moving toward universal equality, with gender roles becoming less fixed as feminine or masculine, and people being allowed to decide for themselves how much they wish to conform to their region's gender roles and traditions.

While "superhero" isn't an inherently male or female role, relegating female supers to the status of sidekicks of male supers, or including "man," "lad," "woman," "lass," or other gender-specific terms in a superhero's name are examples of societal gender expectations.

GENDER IDENTITY is how a person feels inside, what gender they assign themselves, what gender roles they adopt, and how they show their gender through their clothing, their mannerisms, behavior, and personal appearance. Some people, though, may choose not to express their gender identity it if doesn't match their assigned sex.

Gender identity is a feeling that can begin early in life (sometimes as early as 3 years old), although some people take longer to come to terms with how they feel. Most people feel either male or female. Some may have a gender identity that crosses society's gender lines; for instance, feeling like a masculine female or a feminine male. And some people feel neither male nor female; they may choose labels like "gender-fluid," "gender-queer," or "gender variant."

A superhero can have any gender identity (in both super and secret identity) that a mundane person can, and many options for expressing their gender identities. For example, a female superhero could wear a costume that includes a short skirt or emphasizes her breasts, or could wear battle-armor that conceals her sex; a male super could frequently go shirtless, or could change gender when he adopts his super identity.

CISGENDER AND TRANSGENDER: "Cis-" comes from a Latin prefix meaning "on this side of," and "trans-" comes from a Latin prefix meaning "on the other side of." Cisgender people's assigned sex and gender identity are the same, both "on this side." Transgender, or trans, individuals' assigned sex is different from their gender identity (such as someone who is assigned male at birth, but who feels that their true identity is female), with the two "on other sides" of each other.

Not all transgender people have the same response to the disagreement between their assigned sex and internal gender identity. Some undergo gender-affirming surgery and hormone treatments to partially or fully align their bodies with their identities; some wish to but are prevented by society or even a simple lack of funds. Some struggle with the disagreement, while others find ways to accept it. And both cis- and transgender males or females can express themselves through male, female, neutral, or other gender identities.

In a world with super-science, powerful magic, and frequent cosmic accidents, it might be easier for supers wanting to transform their bodies to correct a gender mismatch—even changing a biological sex down to the chromosomal level—but there are also possibilities for super-complications or magical mishaps.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A person's sexual orientation describes who they are attracted to. A person may know their sexual orientation early on, or they may still be figuring it out later in life; both are normal. It isn't known what causes someone to be gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, or asexual. Likely there are several factors affecting this attraction.

Sexual orientation isn't a choice; although it can sometimes evolve over time, it cannot be changed by therapy, treatments, or pressure from family or friends. Some people may suppress or deny their true orientation in order to conform to external pressures. Some may be in such deep denial that they don't consciously realize or accept their own orientation. But it doesn't change their true orientation. A well-known example of this is the vocal (or even violent) homophobe who later finds out they are gay. They were gay the whole time, even as they were railing against homosexuality, but were denying their identity.

For some people, sexual orientation is very simple; they know who they are attracted to and identify their orientation right away. But for other people it may take years to understand their orientation, and they may take even longer to admit it to themselves and those around them.

It's easier for the player or the GM to decide for game characters, and that's that. But even then, experiences in the game may change how a character feels about their own gender and orientation. And in games with super-technology, magic, and powerful psychic abilities, a character's options for how they deal with these facets of their personality are many and varied.

STRAIGHT people are the most common. This is not to say that they are "normal," or that people who are not straight are "abnormal." It only means that they are the most numerous in modern society. Straight people are only sexually attracted to the opposite gender. Straight people are also called ***HETEROSEXUAL***.

GAY AND LESBIAN people are those who are sexually attracted to their own gender. Gay people are also called ***HOMOSEXUAL***. "Gay" is a term that can be applied to both men and women, while "lesbian" is a term just for women attracted to other women.

BISEXUAL is a term that originally meant being attracted to both men and woman, but as genders other than male and female were recognized, the term came to be used to mean attraction to more than one gender. ***PANSEXUAL*** is a term used to describe people who are attracted to people of all genders, although some use bisexual in this way as well.

QUESTIONING people are unsure of their own gender identity or sexual orientation. Questioning people may be trying to come to terms with long-ingrained stereotypes or phobias based on their upbringing, or they may simply not have figured it all out yet.

ASEXUAL, or "Ace," people are not sexually attracted to anyone. Ace people may or may not be interested in romantic relationships, but they have no real interest in sex. If an ace person is involved in a romantic relationship, it's for the emotional bond and the feeling of closeness to their partner. Some people, referred to as ***GRAYSEXUAL***, are asexual except under certain specific and rare circumstances.

AROMANTIC people have no interest in forming romantic relationships. They may, though, be interested in sex. A person can be both asexual and aromantic.

DEMISEXUAL people are only sexually attracted to people they also have emotional or romantic bonds with. A demisexual person can be straight, gay, or another orientation.

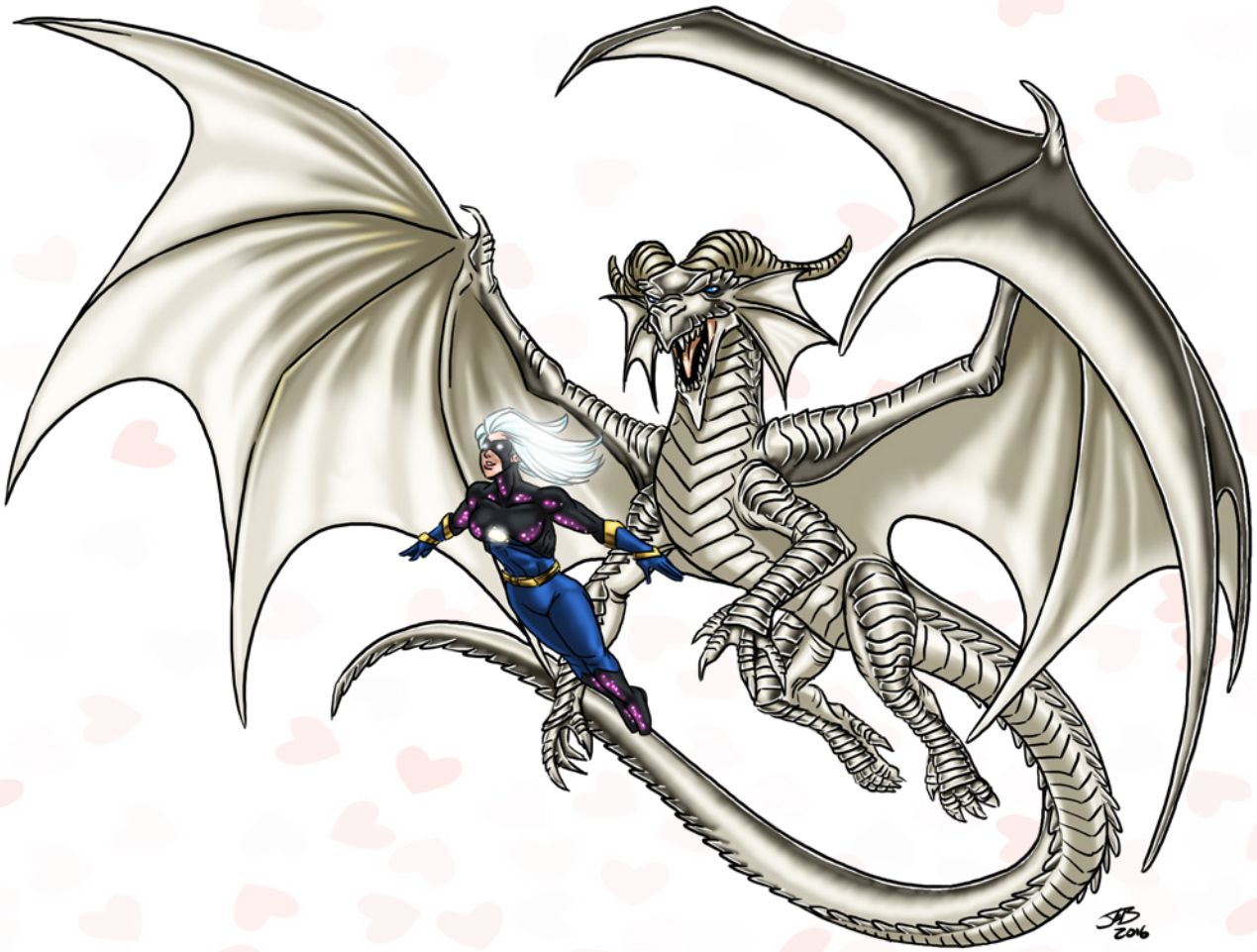
XENOSEXUAL people are attracted to members of one or more other species. In a superhero setting with aliens, artificial lifeforms, and the like, this orientation isn't impossible, but it would be odd for a person to be solely sexually interested in aliens before that person knows of the existence of aliens. As the majority of aliens and relationship-capable androids in comics take male and female forms, many xenosexuals will also have another sexual or romantic orientation, such as an attraction limited to aliens who resemble human males.

QUEER is a term some non-heterosexual or non-cisgender people use to refer to themselves. This term was historically used as a slur, but many now use the term to identify themselves with pride, as a form of defiance. It is best for people who aren't of the LGBTQ+ community, however, to simply avoid using the word.

TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The term "traditional relationship" is commonly used in the modern Western world to mean a monogamous relationship between a man and a woman, often with the implication of marriage and the desire to have children. "Heteronormative" is another term for this. While these relationships are quite common in the 20th and early 21st centuries in the USA and other Western nations, they are by no means traditional throughout history.

For example, in ancient Greece, the Thebans and Spartans viewed intimate homosexual relationships between men as a social necessity, thinking that warriors who loved each other would fight harder for each other. During the same period, the Athenians encouraged Platonic love between men, but discouraged actual intercourse. Both societies treated women as sec-



ond-class citizens. Their ideas of a "traditional relationship" were quite different from those of the modern reader.

In China, writings from the 5th century C.E Liu Song Dynasty indicate that bisexuality was the norm for both men and women, who both had partners of either gender in about equal number. Other cultures, such as some in ancient India or among many Native American societies, had some traditional gender roles, but treated people who behaved outside of those roles as a "third gender." This third gender had no stigma attached to it; it simply was.

Now, in the early 21st century, most of Western society is moving haltingly toward inclusion and acceptance of all orientations, genders, and gender identities. Relationships previously viewed as non-traditional are becoming more commonplace.

Traditional and non-traditional relationships are among the topics that should be discussed during a Session Zero (see page 8). The GM shouldn't assume that all the other players will share the same boundaries: Because of religious convictions, past experiences, or artistic preferences, some players might have no problem with depictions of pre-marital sex but draw the line at extra-marital affairs, or be fine with committed monogamous relationships leading to marriage but be against polyamory or love triangles.

After the Session Zero, the GM might be presented with incompatible players or play styles in the group. Hopefully, some kind of satisfactory arrangement can be made: It is easy enough for the GM to tailor a player's romantic experiences in the game to their stated wishes. The only real problem is when one player is not comfortable participating in a game including the kind of relationship that another player is interested in, even if their PC is not involved. If no accommodation can be reached, it might be a sign that this particular game group isn't right for a romance-involving supers campaign.

Non-Traditional Relationships

Non-traditional relationships aren't just about homosexuality. They also include things like casual relationships, open relationships, polyamorous relationships, same-sex relationships, and love triangles. And both traditional and non-traditional relationships can include good and bad relationships.

Casual Relationships are most common when two people are getting to know each other, and neither has made a commitment to the other. Casual relationships can range from one-night stands to long-term "friends with benefits," where the people involved care about one another as friends, but are either not wanting to change that friendship by getting too serious romantically, or simply don't see each other as compatible long-term romantic partners.

Serious Relationships typically evolve from casual relationships. A serious romantic relationship emerges when deep emotional bonds are formed between those involved, who decide that they want to spend more of their lives with each other. In less ideal circumstances, a forced marriage or an unexpected pregnancy can also lead to a serious (although not necessarily romantic) relationship.

Closed Relationships involve specific people, with no sexual or romantic contact with people outside the relationship.

Open Relationships involve partners with a close bond of love and affection, but who are allowed to venture outside the boundaries of the relationship (emotionally or sexually), so long as they follow certain agreed-upon rules, such as maintaining open communication with the other member(s), not keeping secrets, or conversely not letting members of the open relationship know about any outside relationships.

Chapter 3: The Wide World of Relationships

MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS are closed relationships between two people. Traditionally, this has meant one man and one woman, but this need not be the case.

POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS involve more than two people. Some poly groups are serious, committed, and closed romantic sets, all engaging in romantic and sexual relations with each other, while others are casual, temporary, or open. While communication is important to any good relationship, it is especially vital in polyamorous relationships in order to avoid confusion, hurt feelings, or miscommunications. Currently in the United States, legal marriage is restricted to couples; anything more is classed as bigamy, which is a crime.

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS can take any form: casual or serious, open or closed, monogamous or polyamorous, good or bad, sexual or romantic.

PRE-MARITAL SEX is frequently frowned upon and has even been illegal at times in cultures ranging from ancient Israel to traditional Western societies of just a few decades ago. It has also happened anyway, with a frequency that won't come as a surprise to most people.

Some societies, though, have encouraged pre-marital sex (sometimes with limits on what activities were condoned) as an outlet for sexual tensions, in order for youth to gain experience, or to test compatibility of potential permanent partners.

Because of the complications of legal marriages between people with dual identities or ambiguous or even criminal legal status, superhero marriages can be rare events, so opportunities for sex within marriage may be reduced.

EXTRA-MARITAL SEX has fewer legal implications now than it did in past decades, but participants might still face the same sort of societal consequences as real-life celebrities and public figures do if infidelity is revealed, such as divorce, negative reaction from fans, reduction of trust among super teammates, loss of security clearances, and the creation of potential vulnerabilities for villains to exploit.

LOVE TRIANGLES are a very different animal than a polyamorous triad. A love triangle emerges when two people are engaged in a closed relationship, and a third person forms an intimate connection to a member of the couple, becoming a rival to the other.

Hollywood script writers love to use love triangles. If the outsider yearns for one person in the couple, even if that person doesn't return that feeling, the mere presence of the outsider puts a strain on the relationship, major issues of love and trust arise. If the member of the couple feels the same way about the outsider, but has not demonstrated their feeling beyond glances or perhaps a clandestine kiss, then every moment any member of the triangle is with any other is one of tension and intrigue. If the member of the couple and the outsider have sex, then the depth of deceit and betrayal increase exponentially, especially if the person caught in the middle has genuine love for the other partner in the couple.

Perhaps the most famous love triangle in literature is King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot. A long-running comics love triangle involves Marvel Girl/Jean Grey, Cyclops/Scott Summers, and Wolverine/Logan (although, the most recent *X-Men* series appears to have turned that relationship into a triad, rather than a love triangle).

While love triangles are catnip for Hollywood, they can be hemlock for a roleplaying game, especially if both parties of the original couple are player characters. If you are the GM and you decide to initiate a love triangle, be certain that your players are not going to carry over any hard feelings or resentments from the game into the real world.

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Stable, healthy, "good" relationships are often seen as boring compared to the drama-filled ones of fiction, and writers will often throw in "bad" elements to shake up a relationship and renew the interest of readers. Superheroic RPG campaigns don't necessarily have to follow this practice.

"BAD" RELATIONSHIPS

In most good relationships the people involved understand the boundaries of the relationship, are comfortable with those boundaries, openly communicate with one another, and treat one another with love and respect and as equals. A bad relationship can develop where some part (or parts) of that equation is out of balance.

Bad relationships can take several forms: mistrust, jealousy, and cheating, when one partner treats another as an inferior, as a possession or trophy rather than a person, when one partner is manipulative or cruel, and so on.

Chapter 3: The Wide World of Relationships

Classic bad relationships in comics include the romance between the Joker and Harley Quinn, and between Rogue and Gambit in the X-Men.

THE JOKER & HARLEY QUINN: The Joker treats Harley as a subordinate, a talented (although menial) henchling who is also fun to make out with. He uses gaslighting, manipulation, and probably some psychotropic effects to keep her loyal to him, even though he treats her like dirt. Sure, he makes the occasional grand romantic gesture, but he does so as much to manipulate her into forgiving him for his most recent mistreatment of her as he does to stroke his own ego at how much he can get her to fawn over him. When things are going his way, he's all smiles, but when his plans go awry or Batman gets away, he uses her as an emotional (and occasionally literal) punching bag. Their relationship is clearly one-sided and incredibly toxic to Harley Quinn.

ROGUE & GAMBIT: The relationship between Gambit and Rogue as it was initially presented was unhealthy in a different way. Both Rogue and Gambit had criminal pasts, and they came to the X-Men with emotional baggage. Rogue had been manipulated into becoming a supervillain by her adoptive mother, Mystique. After she lost control of her mutant ability to absorb superpowers by touch, she went to the X-Men for help. A few years later, Gambit joined the team. He had a "bad boy" attitude and a mysterious past, and he flirted with just about every woman he met.

Gambit discovered that Rogue could not touch another person skin to skin without risking killing them, and he immediately began to woo her. But while he acted like he was sympathetic to her loneliness and saw within her the good person she was becoming, his relationship with her always had an undercurrent of dominance. He treated her affliction like a personal challenge, making gestures to prove that he wasn't afraid of her. Rogue had good reason to be cautious, but Gambit repeatedly kept putting her in the position of having to force him away to keep him safe. Then he would act hurt or jealous, until she apologized and begged him to come back to her.

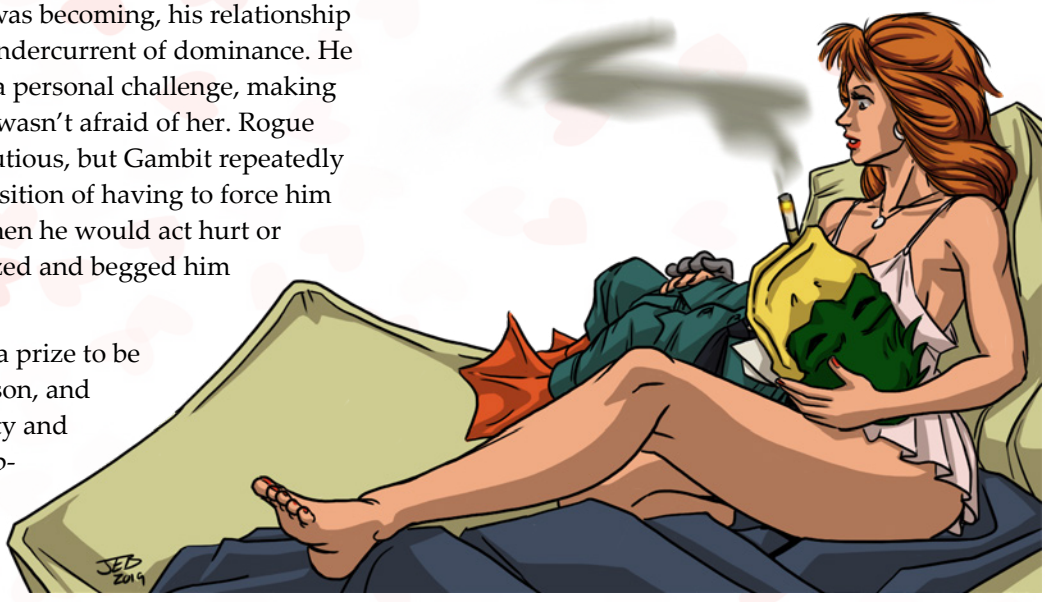
Gambit treated Rogue as a prize to be won, rather than as a person, and he used her own insecurity and his own jealousy to manipulate her. And he did all of this, it was later revealed, while he was still *married*. The Rogue/Gambit relationship has been reshaped over time, so what is described here may not look familiar to new *X-Men* readers. But at the time, it was a good example of a bad relationship. Sadly, much like the Joker and Harley Quinn relationship, there were legions of fans who mistook their relationship as an example of true love.

"TYPICAL" RELATIONSHIP

Some long-standing comic book relationships aren't consistently good or bad, as a result of changing social mores over the decades and drama-fueled story changes. But no real-world relationship is perfect either.

REED RICHARDS & SUE STORM: When *Fantastic Four* debuted in 1961, the team was patterned after the classic 1950s "adventuring scientist and friends" trope. Reed was the team leader and scientist, Ben Grimm was "the big guy," Johnny Storm was "the teenager," and Sue was "the girl." Jack Kirby and Stan Lee played with the formula a bit: Sue was engaged to Reed, rather than being romantically linked to "the teenager," and Ben was an astronaut, making him a highly educated pilot and trained in physics, as well, although not a dedicated scientist like Reed.

Reed and Sue were presented as a happy couple, but with a few problems. Reed would often get lost in his experiments, forgetting about the outside world (including Sue), sometimes for days at a time. Because his intellect was so vast, he could be patronizing toward her, even though she was smart, just not superhumanly



so. Sue was also notably younger than Reed, so had less life experience. Whether Reed realized it or not, he considered Sue the lesser partner in their marriage.

In 1961, a man being involved with a younger woman with no knowledge in his field was not uncommon. However, from the very beginning, Kirby and Lee depicted the power disparity within their relationship as problematic, rather than glossing over it.

Despite their difficulties, Reed and Sue still loved each other, and got married, but even in the modern comics Reed is often frustrated by Sue's inability to grasp his ideas, and Sue is sometimes hurt by his (unintentional) condescension. They have separated and reunited several times, and Sue is clearly attracted to Sub-Mariner/Namor, a sometimes ally/sometimes enemy of the team, who is openly attracted to her, as well.

Whether their marriage can be classified as a "good relationship" or not varies over the years and often depends on the wishes of the comic book writer or movie director. But, in some ways, it's a *realistic* relationship.

"GOOD" RELATIONSHIPS

The fundamentals of equal partnership, love, respect, and communication are essential to good relationships. Sometimes, though, it takes a while for those elements to show themselves.

SUPERMAN & LOIS LANE: The longest-standing romance in superhero comics is between Superman/Clark Kent and Lois Lane, a fellow reporter at the *Daily Planet*. When Lois first appeared (June 1938), she was unusual for a female character in popular media for her willfulness and her competence at a "man's job." Some readers at the time even found her a bit off-putting because of her "tomboyish nature."

The Golden Age version of Lois portrayed her as Clark's equal professionally. From the mid-1950s to the 1970s that changed, and Lois was reduced to a somewhat incompetent character, perpetually getting in over her head while working as an investigative reporter, needing Superman to rescue her from mobsters or to catch her after she was thrown off of a seemingly endless succession of high buildings. From the '70s on, she has been restored to a competent, strong-willed professional woman who excels at her job (if not necessarily at spelling).

After meeting Superman, Lois quickly fell in love with him, but while she was work friends with Clark Kent, she felt that she was more intelligent and sophisticated than Clark, since she was a Metropolis urbanite, and Clark was a big, bumbling, well-meaning, and somewhat naïve farm-boy from Kansas. This made their relationship unbalanced and odd.

Superman kept Lois at arm's length for a time, but eventually a romance developed between them. For many, many years of their comics run, Lois was kept in the dark about Superman's true identity. This meant that Clark repeatedly had to deceive her to preserve his secret. Some of the storylines told in the Silver Age that were written to be playful and comedic then, especially in the title *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*, make one or the other character (or sometimes both) look petty and cruel to modern eyes, with Lois being constantly insecure and jealous, and Clark acting patronizing towards her much of the time.

Eventually, the Silver Age of comics gave way to the more mature characterizations of the Bronze Age, and Lois was let in on the secret. The post-*Crisis on Infinite Earths* version of both characters depicted them as emotionally well-rounded, restored Lois to being a competent, intelligent reporter with a background in martial arts from her "Army brat" childhood, and their relationship changed to a very strong, healthy one from that point on. In the current comics they are married and are the parents of the current Superboy, Jon Kent.

EMPOWERED & THUGBOY: Perhaps the best example of a good relationship in modern comics comes from Adam Warren's title *Empowered*. The comic was initially presented as an adult-themed, cheesecake and light bondage vehicle. In it, the title character (Elissa Megan Powers, who often goes by "Emp") is a superheroine with a skintight super suit that gives her superpowers. However, the suit is fragile, and the more damage it takes, the less power it grants. It regenerates over time, but it often leaves Emp powerless at inopportune moments.

Despite the sexist nature of the book, Warren has managed to make *Empowered* remarkably… well… empowering. Emp is a sympathetic character, especially since most of the other costumed superheroes in her world are self-centered, arrogant jerks. She develops several strong friendships, and eventually falls in love with a retired professional henchman who goes by the codename Thugboy.

The relationship between Empowered and Thugboy is remarkably healthy, despite the fact that both of them have a great deal of emotional baggage, and Thugboy has a dark past. Whenever Emp is feeling insecure, Thugboy is always supportive of her. When Thugboy feels that he is irredeemable, Emp is there to remind him of how far he has come on the road to redemption. They both clearly love each other, and they are equal partners in their relationship. They talk openly about their emotions and their needs, and they are always supportive of one another. The title has even won awards for this exact reason!

SUPER ROMANCE IN YOUR GAME

Relationships, and the people in them, clearly take any number of forms. It is advisable as a GM to include a variety of relationship types among the NPCs in your game to add verisimilitude to the campaign.

Romances between player characters will largely run themselves, although you can help by giving the PCs down time so that they can go on dates and celebrate anniversaries without always having to duck Dr. Badnik's latest death ray. But love affairs between PCs and NPCs are the relationships that will require most of your attention.

As the person in control of the vast majority of the people in your game world, you have a great deal of power to shape the direction these relationships will take. This includes whether the relationship has a fair shot at being stable in the long term, or if it is doomed to fail from the start.

OBSTACLES

If you are running an NPC that you did not necessarily plan to include in a romance and a PC seems interested in them anyway, when you are deciding who that NPC is and what they want from a relationship in more depth, there may be a temptation to lean towards hiding some initially unobvious incompatibility in their personality to use it as a hook to generate drama. This is fine, so long as it doesn't become commonplace. Gaming is about escapism, and a player who initiates a romance with an NPC obviously does so in the hopes that things will work out between their characters. Similarly, putting NPCs who are love interests in danger is a classic comics trope, but actually killing them is not.

If several PCs' partners get killed during the course of the game, or if it seems like the vast majority of relationships between PCs and NPCs end in painful breakups, then the players will decide that it just isn't worthwhile to engage in romantic relationships with your NPCs, and nobody wants that.

Don't be afraid to let the player characters be happy! If a PC finds a love interest they click well with and that the player thinks they have chemistry with, run with it! Unhappiness isn't mandatory. There are a lot of ways to use romance to create dramatic scenes between people who truly love each other, whether those scenes are tragic, comic, or joyous. Players who are in long-running campaigns where their PCs are in happy, stable relationships will remember that campaign fondly, and will likely talk about it for years afterwards.

Chapter 3: The Wide World of Relationships

THE NPC POV

Unless the relationship is intended to be brief, like a fling or a one-night stand, it's always best for you as a GM to look at the relationship through the NPC's eyes, and have them act accordingly. Most people want their romantic relationships to last, but at the same time, everyone has their limits.

Pay attention to how the PC treats the NPC. If they are rude, dismissive, condescending, or disrespectful, have the NPC react accordingly (whatever that would mean for the NPC in question: talking to the player character about it, throwing the PC's stuff out the window, starting a fight, or something else). If the player character is maintaining a secret identity, and they have to keep breaking dates or sneaking off, it's only natural that their partner would get suspicious.

But try not to have every NPC believe that a single deception is a deal-breaker for a relationship, for example. That will automatically doom any relationship that the PC with the secret identity enters into before it even starts, even if they might eventually have shared their secret once they decided that the circumstances were right.

ACCEPTABILITY

You may find that some people in the superpowered community, whether heroes, villains, or something in between, have a more flexible outlook on social norms than the government or the general public. Prejudices about how someone identifies, how someone looks, what the boundaries are in a relationship, and how many people can be in a relationship all become less rigid among people who are exposed to exotic-looking mutants, magical creatures, humans with strange powers, and people and cultures from other planets. In a world of talking apes and the occasional alien invasion, judging someone by the color of their skin or who they choose to marry seems petty.

Many gamers have gender identities or orientations that don't match traditional Western social norms, and their game characters may have non-traditional identities and orientations too—and not necessarily the same as the players. Other gamers might be cis, straight, and in a monogamous relationship but still interested in playing a PC that isn't.

It's not a GM's job to force diversity on the campaign (especially if some players expressed resistance to the idea in the pre-game Session Zero), but the GM should provide opportunities for the players to explore their PCs. If players decide to have their PCs pursue non-traditional romances, then at least some NPCs should be ready for a polyamorous, open relationships.

So if superhero Dart/Cameron (an openly bisexual male PC) is dating Impact/Bunny (a female NPC), and they both are invited to join Mockingbird/Missy (an openly bisexual female PC) and her high school sweetheart Starblaze/Mike (a straight male PC), for a group experience, while you could decide that NPC Bunny is not interested, there is more long-term potential for romantic storytelling if you affirm the player's suggestion and allow Bunny to be bi-curious and see where things go.

SUPER-FANS

In a world with paranormals, big-name superheroes are like rock stars. In fact, they are probably even more like rock stars than actual rock stars. Superheroes with cool names, dynamic costumes, and interesting powers attract followers among the non-powered community. Whether they want to or not, any of the PC-level heroes are likely to have fans who generate an online presence for them, or fanzines and BBSes if the game is set before the Internet. Some supers may even inspire cults! In the age of camera-phones, any public appearance can result in pictures of their activities being posted online. People will want to wear T-shirts with the logos of their favorite characters, and fan artwork of them (with varying degrees of accuracy) will be common at superhero conventions. Companies will produce toys. People will write fanfic. And there will inevitably be some sort of porn.

This also means that there will be supergroupies, normal bystanders who want to sleep with superheroes (or villains) just because they *are* superheroes (or villains). These groupies will range from well-meaning fans and cosplayers to obsessed stalkers and haters. Naturally, supervillains will attract the more lunatic fringe element to them, and some villains may even recruit from among their groupies. Other villains may use treat their groupies as prey, fleecing them out of their money (or worse).

And even if they aren't hate-filled, some super-fans can become copy-cat imitators, with all sorts of complication potential.

4. Session Zero Suggestions

The following are some introductory questions that you might ask your players in a Session Zero before starting a supers campaign with sex and romance elements (see page 8). Not every question will be absolutely necessary, although most of the topics should be at least touched on. Some might get simple "Yep. Sure" responses. Others are likely to lead to in-depth discussion and more questions that will spring from the debate.

Remember that not all players will be willing to open up on all subjects in a group discussion. Before you have the in-person Session Zero, you should contact all the players individually and ask if there are any topics in the realm of sex and romance that they'd prefer to discuss in private, including topics that they don't want to get into even in private. And some topics, like abortion, might be best handled individually or by e-mail because of the possibility of derailing arguments springing up that aren't game-related.

After the session, the GM can decide if there are incompatible players or play styles in the group, and whether some kind of satisfactory arrangement can be made or if a romance-involving supers campaign isn't meant for this group.

NOTE: These are only questions about the romance part of the campaign. You'll also want to discuss things like power level, violence level, whether heroes can die, horror elements, politics, religion, who brings the snacks, house game rules, cellphone use at the game table, *etc.*; you can find lists online of recommended topics.

- ***SEX AND ROMANCE:*** Do the players have any interest in their characters developing sexual or romantic relationships, serious or otherwise? Do they mind if other people's characters do likewise? If any players are uncomfortable engaging in romance in a game themselves, are they willing to allow others to do so?
- ***DESCRIPTIONS:*** How detailed or graphic should romance/love/sex scenes be? Does it make a difference if the players and GM roleplaying the scene have different genders than the PCs and NPCs involved?
- ***NPC VS. PC:*** Should there be different limits on sex and romance between a player character and a non-player character and one between two PCs?
- ***REAL-LIFE RELATIONSHIPS:*** Would the members of a real-life gaming couple be okay with their characters having relationships with other PCs or NPCs in the game? How would a member of a broken-up real-world couple react if one of their PCs made advances at the other? Are there any players who would object to roleplaying romantic encounters with any other specific player?
- ***RAPE:*** You should *never* have rape as part of an RPG storyline. Don't even include this as a topic in your Session Zero, as a victim of sexual assault might not want to discuss it, even in private. That said, some player might consider including rape or some other trauma as part of their character's backstory. You might want to try talking that player out of the idea, but otherwise you'll need the permission of *all* the other players before allowing this in the campaign even as a background element.
- ***MIND-CONTROL:*** Many villains have mind-control powers. Should any of them ever use this for sexual purposes? Merely threaten it? How about misguided heroes? (Note: Even if the players agree to this as a plot element, it should never be explicitly described.)
- ***SEDUCTION:*** Although not as unsavory as mind-control, seduction (of a PC or by a PC) can be distasteful to some players. Should seduction be allowed by PCs? Should villains or other NPCs be allowed to seduce PCs? And should seduction be roleplayed or handled through dice rolls and game mechanics?
- ***AGE OF CHILDREN:*** Of course, sex involving children should not be considered for your game, but what age do your players consider inappropriate? How old is young? what age is a "child"? At what age can characters hold hands? kiss? have sex?
- ***THREATS TO CHILDREN:*** Sexual assault is right out, but some players might also balk at children being kidnapped, possessed, or threatened in other ways.

Chapter 4: Session Zero Suggestions

- **AGE OF PLAYERS:** If there are non-adult players in the group, should that change what sort of romance themes are allowed in the campaign or how they're depicted? Should sex and romance be allowed only when the younger players aren't present? Should it happen but only "off-screen"?
- **NON-TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIPS:** Are any types of non-traditional relationships that the players are uncomfortable having their PCs engage in, or which would make them uncomfortable if NPCs or other peoples' characters engaged in them?
- **HOMOSEXUALITY:** Are the players okay with the possibility of PCs or NPCs being homosexual or other non-straight genders?
- **HOMOPHOBIA:** Even if the players are fine with non-straight characters, would they be okay with homophobia in the game, such as anti-gay politicians as opponents?
- **RACISM:** Inter-racial marriage has been legal throughout the United States for over half a century and inter-racial couple have appeared in the comics since the '80s, but some people are still uncomfortable with it.
- **SUPER GENDER-CHANGING:** Gender-changing can be easy and frequent in a supers campaign, not just to correct gender mismatches, but also as the result of magical mishaps or supervillain attacks. How would the players react to an unwilling switch happening to PCs?
- **PREGNANCY:** Can PCs and important NPCs get pregnant? And if so, nobody wants a superheroic adventure centered on a hero missing a few days taking birth control pills while on a cosmic quest, or one charting fertile days in order to have a baby, but should pregnancy only happen if it's planned?
- **MISCARRIAGE:** Considering the rough lives female superheroes lead, miscarriage is very possible in a realistic supers campaign. But a GM needs to step lightly here, even if all players say during the Session Zero that they're fine with the possibility. (See also Threats to Children.)
- **ABORTION:** If pregnancy can occur in the game, then it's possible that the topic of abortion (medical, magical, ultra-high tech) will come up. Players are likely to have strong personal opinions on this subject, so discussion must be respectful and focused on the game, not real-life.
- **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES:** Probably something that most players would prefer to avoid completely in their escapist games, but a GM could build a campaign theme around HIV/AIDS or a similar illness, with legal implications, issues of mortality and morality, government response, *etc.* Would the players be interested in dealing with safe sex and STD themes in the game?
- **BEHIND THE SCENES:** Is it okay with the others if one player sometimes communicates privately with the GM (*e.g.*, via e-mail or in a solo game session) to further a romantic plotline?
- **OFF-LIMITS:** Are there any topics that a player wants to be totally off-limits (even if they only involve other PCs or just NPCs)? Because a player might be uncomfortable bringing such a topic up in advance, some GMs use an X-card system, putting a card with an X on it on the table that a player can tap to detour play away from a touchy subject.
- **MISSED TOPICS:** The GM should always ask the players if there are any topics that weren't already included in the Session Zero conversation that should discussed.

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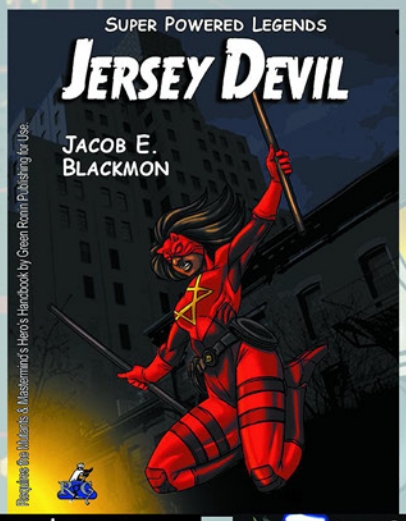
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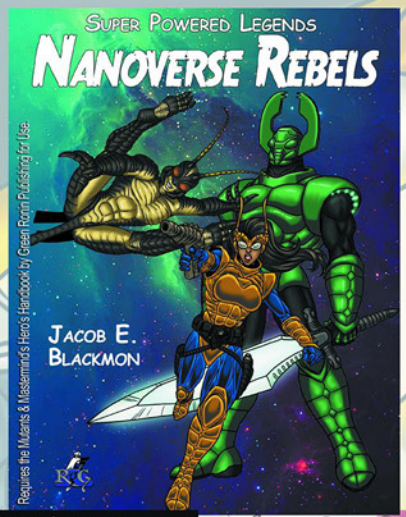
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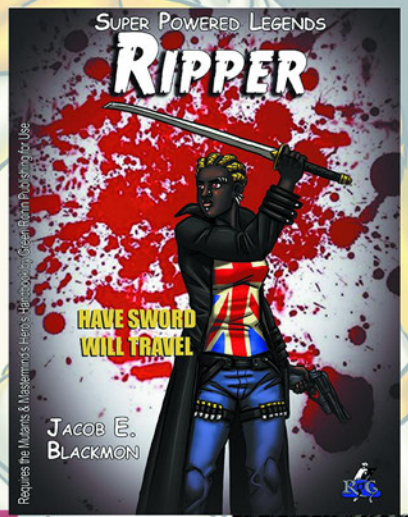
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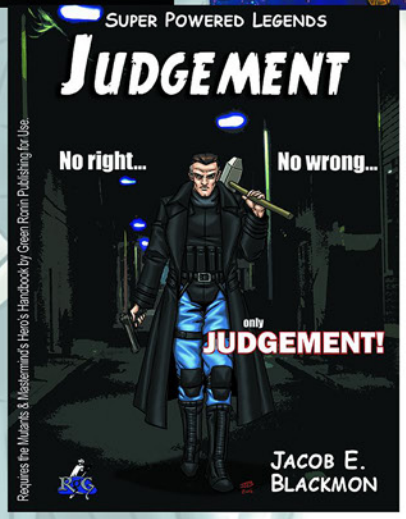

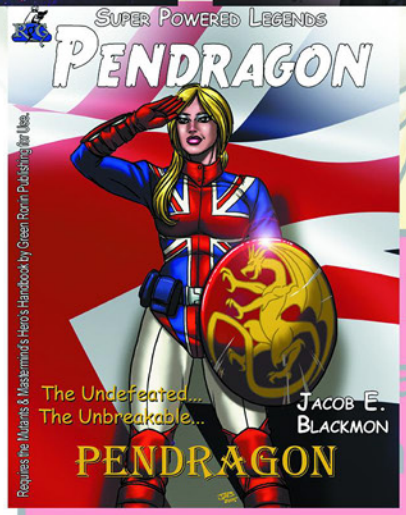

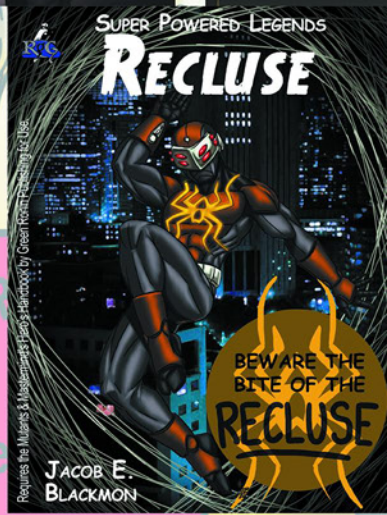
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